

HARPERTEEN IMPULSE

A
SELECTION
NOVELLA



THE
GUARD

#1 *New York Times* BESTSELLING AUTHOR

KIERA CASS



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HARPER **TEEN**

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CHAPTER 1

“WAKE UP, LEGER.”

“Day off,” I mumbled, pulling the blanket over my head.

“No one’s off today. Get up, and I’ll explain.”

I sighed. I was normally excited to get to work. The routine, the discipline, the sense of accomplishment at the end of the day: I loved it all. Today was a different story.

Last night’s Halloween party had been my last chance. When America and I had our one dance, and she explained Maxon’s distance, I got a minute to remind her of who we were . . . and I felt it. Those threads that bound us together were still there. Perhaps they had frayed from the strain of the Selection, but they were holding.

“Tell me you’ll wait for me,” I’d pleaded.

She said nothing, but I didn’t lose hope.

Not until he was there, marching up to her, dripping charm and wealth and power. That was it. I’d lost.

Whatever Maxon had whispered to her out on the dance floor seemed to sweep every worry from her head. She clung to him, song after song, staring into his eyes the way she used to stare into mine.

So maybe I’d downed a little too much alcohol while I watched it happen. And maybe that vase in the foyer was broken because I threw it. And maybe I’d stifled my cries by biting my pillow so Avery wouldn’t hear me.

If Avery’s words this morning were any indication, chances were Maxon proposed late last night, and we would all be on call for the official announcement.

How was I supposed to face that moment? How was I supposed to stand there and *protect* it? He was going to give her a ring I could never afford, a life I could never provide . . . and I would hate him to my very last breath for it.

I sat up, keeping my eyes down. “What’s happening?” I asked, my head throbbing with every syllable.

“It’s bad. Really bad.”

I scrunched my forehead and looked up. Avery was sitting on his bed, buttoning his shirt. Our eyes met, and I could see the worry in his.

“What do you mean? What’s bad?” If this was some stupid drama over not finding the right colored tablecloths or something, I was going back to bed.

Avery exhaled. "You know Woodwork? Friendly guy, smiles a lot?"

"Yeah. We do rounds together sometimes. He's nice." Woodwork had been a Seven, and we'd bonded almost instantly over our large families and deceased fathers. He was a hard worker, and it was clear that he was someone who truly deserved his new caste. "Why? What's going on?"

Avery seemed stunned. "He got caught last night with one of the Elite girls."

I froze. "What? How?"

"The cameras. Reporters were getting candid shots of people wandering around the palace and one of them heard something in a closet. Opened it up and found Woodwork with Lady Marlee."

"But that's"—I almost said *America's closest friend*, but caught myself just in time—"crazy," I finished.

"You're telling me." Avery picked up his socks and continued to dress. "He seemed so smart. Must have just had too much to drink."

He probably had, but I doubted that was why this had happened. Woodwork was smart. He wanted to take care of his family as much as I did mine. The only explanation for why he would have risked getting caught would be the same reason I had risked it: he must love Marlee desperately.

I massaged my temples, willing the headache to clear. I couldn't feel like this right now, not with something so big happening. My eyes popped open as I understood what this might mean.

"Are they . . . are they going to kill them?" I asked quietly, like maybe if I said it too loud everyone would remember that was what the palace did to traitors.

Avery shook his head, and I felt my heart start beating again. "They're going to cane them. And the other Elite and their families are going to be front and center for it. The blocks are already set up outside the palace walls, so we're all on standby. Get your uniform on."

He stood and walked to the door. "And get some coffee before you report in," he said over his shoulder. "You look like you're the one getting caned."

The third and fourth floors were high enough to see over the thick walls that protected the palace from the rest of the world, and I quickly made my way to a broad window on the fourth floor. I looked down at the seats for the royal family and the Elite, as well as the stage for Marlee and Woodwork. It seemed most of the guards and staff had the same idea I did, and I nodded at the two other guards who were standing at the window, and the one butler, his uniform looking freshly pressed but his face wrinkled with worry. Just as the

palace doors opened, and the girls and their families went marching out to the thunderous cheering of the crowd, two maids came rushing up behind us. Recognizing Lucy and Mary, I made a space for them beside me.

“Is Anne coming?” I asked.

“No,” Mary said. “She didn’t think it was right when there was so much work to do.”

I nodded. That sounded like her.

I ran into America’s maids all the time since I guarded her door at night, and while I always tried to be professional in the palace, I tended to let some of the formality slip with them. I wanted to know the people who took care of my girl; in my eyes, I would forever be beholden to them for all the things they did for her.

I looked down at Lucy and could see she was wringing her hands. Even in my short time at the palace, I had noticed that when she got stressed, her anxieties manifested themselves in a dozen physical tics. Training camp taught me to look for nervous behavior when people entered the palace, to watch those people in particular. I knew Lucy was no threat, and when I saw her in distress, I felt a need to protect her.

“Are you sure you want to watch this?” I whispered to her. “It won’t be pretty.”

“I know. But I really liked Lady Marlee,” she replied, just as quietly. “I feel like I should be here.”

“She’s not a lady anymore,” I commented, sure that she would be torn down to the lowest rank possible.

Lucy thought for a moment. “Any girl who would risk her life for someone she loves certainly deserves to be called a lady.”

I grinned. “Excellent point.” I watched as her hands stilled and a tiny smile came to her face for a flicker of a second.

The crowd’s cheers turned to cries of disdain as Marlee and Woodwork hobbled across the gravel and into the space cleared in front of the palace gates. The guards pulled them rather harshly, and based on his gait, I guessed Woodwork had already taken a beating.

We couldn’t make out the words, but we watched as their crimes were announced to the world. I focused on America and her family. May looked like she was trying to hold herself in one piece, arms wrapped around her stomach protectively. Mr. Singer’s expression was uneasy, but calm. Mer just seemed confused. I wished there was a way to hold her and tell her it was going to be all right without ending up bound to a block myself.

I remembered watching Jemmy being whipped for stealing. If I could have taken his place, I would have done it without question. At the same time, I remembered the overwhelming sense of relief that I

had never been caught the few times I had stolen. I imagined America must be feeling that way right now, wishing Marlee didn't have to go through this, but so thankful it wasn't us.

When the canes came down, Mary and Lucy both jumped even though we couldn't hear anything but the crowd. There was just enough space between each lashing to allow Woodwork and Marlee to feel the pain, but not adjust to it before a new strike drove the burn in deeper. There's an art to making people suffer. The palace seemed to have it mastered.

Lucy covered her face with her hands and wept quietly while Mary put an arm around her for comfort.

I was about to do the same when a flash of red hair caught my eye. What was she doing? Was she fighting that guard?

Everything in my body was at war. I wanted to run down there and shove her in her seat while at the same time, I was desperate to grab her hand and take her away. I wanted to cheer her on and simultaneously beg her to stop. This wasn't the time or place to draw attention to herself.

I watched as America hopped the rail, the hem of her dress flying in the fall. It was then, when she slammed into the ground and regrouped, that I saw she wasn't trying to take refuge from the nightmare in front of her but instead was focused on the steps it would take to get to Marlee.

Pride and fear swelled in my chest.

"Oh, my goodness!" Mary gasped.

"Sit down, my lady!" Lucy pleaded, pressing her hands against the window.

She was running, missing one shoe, but still refusing to give up.

"Sit down, Lady America!" one of the guards standing by me yelled.

She hit the bottom stair to the platform, and my brain was on fire from the pounding blood.

"There are cameras!" I shouted at her through the glass.

A guard finally caught her, knocking her to the ground. She thrashed, still putting up a fight. My gaze flickered to the royals; all their eyes were on the red-haired girl writhing on the ground.

"You should get back to her room," I told Mary and Lucy. "She's going to need you."

They turned and ran. "You two," I said to the guards. "Go downstairs and make sure extra protection isn't needed. No telling who caught that or might be upset by it."

They sprinted away, heading for the first floor. I wanted to be with America, to go to her room this very second. But under the circumstances, I knew patience would be the best. It was better for her

to be alone with her maids.

Last night, I had asked America to wait for me, thinking she might be going home before me. Again, that idea came to the forefront of my mind. Would the king tolerate this?

I was aching all over, trying to breathe and think and process.

“Magnificent,” the butler breathed. “Such bravery.”

He backed away from the window and went back to his duties, and I was left wondering if he meant the couple on the platform or the girl in the dirty dress. As I stood there, still taking in all that had just happened, the caning came to an end. The royals exited, the crowd dispersed, and a handful of guards were left to carry away the two limp bodies that seemed to lean toward each other, even in unconsciousness.

CHAPTER 2

I REMEMBERED THE DAYS OF waiting to run to the tree house, how it seemed like the watch hands were moving backward. This was a thousand times worse. I *knew* something was wrong. I *knew* she needed me. And I couldn't get to her.

The best I could do was switch posts with the guard who was scheduled to watch her door tonight. Until night fell and I could see her again, I'd have to bury myself in my job.

I was heading to the kitchen for a late breakfast when I heard the complaints.

"I want to see my daughter." I recognized Mr. Singer's voice, but I'd never heard him sound so desperate.

"I'm sorry, sir. For safety reasons, we need to get you out of the palace now," a guard answered. Lodge, by the sound of it. I poked my head around the corner, and sure enough Lodge was there trying to calm Mr. Singer.

"But you've kept us caged since that disgusting display, my child was dragged away, and I haven't seen her! I want to see her!"

I approached them with an air of confidence and intervened. "Allow me to handle this, Officer Lodge."

Lodge dipped his head and stepped away. Most of the time, if I acted like I was in control, people listened to me. It was simple and effective.

Once Lodge was down the hall, I bent in toward Mr. Singer. "You can't talk like that here, sir. You saw what just happened, and that was over a kiss and an unzipped dress."

America's dad nodded and ran his fingers through his hair. "I know. I know you're right. I can't believe they made her watch that. I can't believe they did it to May."

"If it's any consolation, America's maids are very devoted, and I'm sure they're taking care of her. There was no report of her going to the hospital wing, so she must not have gotten hurt. Not physically anyway. From what I understand"—God, how I hated saying this out loud—"Prince Maxon favors her more than the others."

Mr. Singer gave me a thin smile that didn't quite meet his eyes. "True."

Everything in me fought against asking him what he knew. "I'm sure he'll be very patient with her as she deals with her loss."

He nodded then spoke under his breath, as if he was talking to

himself. "I expected more from him."

"Sir?"

He took a deep breath and stood up straight. "Nothing." Mr. Singer looked around, and I couldn't tell if he was in awe of the palace or disgusted by it. "You know, Aspen, she'd never believe me if I told her she was good enough for this place. In a way she's right. She's too good for it."

"Shalom?" Mr. Singer and I both turned to see Mrs. Singer and May walking around the corner, carrying their bags. "We're ready. Have you seen America?"

May left her mother and quickly tucked herself into her father's side. He wrapped a protective arm around her. "No. But Aspen will check on her."

I hadn't said anything of that nature, but we were practically family and he knew that I would. Of course I would.

Mrs. Singer gave me a brief hug. "I can't tell you what a comfort it is to know you're here, Aspen. You're smarter than the rest of the guards combined."

"Don't let them hear you say that," I joked, and she smiled before pulling away.

May rushed over, and I bent down a little so we were on the same level. "Here are some extra hugs. Could you go by my house and give them to my family for me?"

She nodded into my shoulder. I waited for her to let go, but she didn't. Suddenly she pushed her lips to my ear. "Don't let anyone hurt her."

"Never."

She gripped me tighter, and I did the same, wanting so badly to protect her from everything around her.

May and America were bookends, alike in more ways than either of them could see. But May was softer around the edges. No one sheltered her from the world; she sheltered herself. America had been only a few months older than May was now when we started dating, making a decision most people older than us would never have had the guts to face. But while America was aware of the bad around her, the consequences that could come if things ever went wrong, May practically skipped through life, completely blind to what was worst in the world.

I worried that some of that innocence had been stolen from her today.

She finally loosened her grip, and I stood, holding a hand out to Mr. Singer. He took it and spoke quietly. "I'm glad she has you. It's like she's got a piece of home with her."

My eyes locked on his, and again I was struck with the urge to ask

him what he knew. I wondered if, at the very least, he suspected something. Mr. Singer's gaze was unwavering, and, because I'd been trained, I searched his face for secrets. I could never begin to guess at what he was hiding from me, but I knew without a doubt that there was something there.

"I'll look after her, sir."

He smiled. "I know you will. Look after yourself, too. Some would argue this post is even more dangerous than New Asia. We want you to come home safe."

I nodded. Out of the millions of words in the world, Mr. Singer always seemed to know how to pick the handful that made you feel like you mattered.

"I've never been treated so harshly," someone muttered, rounding the corner. "And at the palace of all places."

Our heads collectively turned. It sounded like Celeste's parents weren't taking the request to leave very well either. Her mother was dragging a large bag, shaking her head in agreement with her husband, flicking her blond hair over her shoulder every few seconds. Part of me wanted to walk over and hand her a pin.

"You there," Mr. Newsome said to me. "Come and fetch these bags." He dropped his suitcases on the floor.

Mr. Singer spoke up. "He's not your servant. He's here to protect you. You can carry your own bags."

Mr. Newsome rolled his eyes and turned to his wife. "Can't believe our baby has to associate with a Five." He whispered the words, though he obviously intended for all of us to hear.

"I hope she hasn't picked up any of her sloppy manners. Our girl's too good for that trash." Mrs. Newsome flicked her hair again, and I could see where Celeste learned to sharpen those claws of hers. Not that I expected anything more from a Two.

I could hardly look away from Mrs. Newsome's wickedly happy face, except for the muffled sound next to me. May was crying into her mother's shirt. As if this day hadn't been hard enough already.

"Safe trip, Mr. Singer," I whispered. He nodded to me and escorted his family through the front doors. I could see the cars were waiting already. America was going to hate that she didn't get to say goodbye.

I walked over to Mr. Newsome. "Don't let them bother you, sir. Leave your bags right here, and I'll make sure they're taken care of."

"Good lad," Mr. Newsome said, and patted me on the back before straightening his tie and pulling his wife along with him.

Once they were outside, I walked to the table near the entrance and pulled a pen out of the drawer. There was no chance of me getting away with doing this twice, so I had to decide which one of

the Newsomes I hated more at the moment. Right now, it was Mrs. Newsome, if only for May's sake. I unzipped her bag, stuck the pen inside, and snapped it in half. I got a dot of ink on one hand, but seeing as I had thousands of dollars' worth of clothes in front of me to wipe it on, the mark was quickly taken care of. I watched as the Newsomes climbed into a car, then threw their bags into the trunk and allowed myself a small smile. But while destroying some of Mrs. Newsome's clothes was satisfying, I knew it wouldn't really affect her in the long run. She'd replace them within days. May would have to live with those words in her ears forever.

I held the bowl close to my chest as I lifted forkfuls of eggs and chopped sausage to my mouth, eager to get outdoors. The kitchen was packed with guards and servants, wolfing down meals as they started shifts.

"He was telling her he loved her through the entire thing," Fry was saying. "I was posted by the platform and could hear it the whole time. Even after she passed out, Woodwork was saying it."

Two maids hung on his every word, one tilting her head sadly. "How could the prince do that to them? They were in love."

"Prince Maxon is a good man. He was just obeying the law," the other maid shot back. "But . . . the whole time?"

Fry nodded.

The second maid shook her head. "No wonder Lady America ran for them."

I stepped around the large table, moving to the other side of the room.

"She kneed me pretty hard," Recen shared, wincing a little at the memory. "I couldn't stop her from jumping; I could barely breathe."

I smiled to myself, though I felt for the guy.

"That Lady America is pretty damn brave. The king could have put her on the block for something like that." A younger butler, wide-eyed and enthusiastic, seemed to be taking the whole thing in as entertainment.

I moved again, fearing I'd say or do something stupid if I heard any more. I passed Avery, but he only nodded. The set of his mouth and eyebrows was all I needed to see to know he wasn't interested in company right now.

"It could have been so much worse," a maid whispered.

Her companion nodded. "At least they're alive."

I couldn't escape it. A dozen conversations overlapped, mixing into one commentary in my ears. America's name surrounded me, the word on nearly everyone's lips. I found myself swelling with pride one moment only to plunge into anger the next.

If Maxon truly was a decent man, America never would have been in this situation in the first place.

I took another swing with the ax, splitting the wood. The sun felt good on my bare chest and the act of destroying something was helping me get out my rage. Rage for Woodwork and Marlee and May and America. Rage for myself.

I lined up another piece and swung with a growl.

"Chopping wood or trying to scare the birds?" someone called.

I turned to see an older man a few yards away, walking a horse by the bit and wearing a vest that marked him as an outdoor palace worker. His face was wrinkled, but his age didn't dim his smile. I had a feeling that I'd seen him around before, but I couldn't think of the place.

"Sorry, did I spook the horse?" I asked.

"Nah," he said, walking over. "Just sounds like you're having a rough one."

"Well," I answered, lifting the ax again, "today has been rough on everyone." I swung, dividing the wood again.

"Yep. Seems to be the case." He rubbed the horse behind her ears. "Did you know him?"

I paused, not really sure I felt like talking. "Not well. We had a lot in common, though. I just can't believe it happened. Can't believe he lost everything."

"Eh. Everything doesn't seem like anything when you love someone. Especially when you're young."

I studied the man. He was obviously a stable keeper, and though I could have been wrong, I was willing to guess he was younger than he looked. Maybe he'd been through something that had weathered him.

"You've got a point," I agreed. Wasn't I willing to lose everything for Mer?

"He'd risk it again. And so would she."

"So would I," I mumbled, staring at the ground.

"What, son?"

"Nothing." I shouldered the ax and grabbed another hunk of wood, hoping he'd take the hint.

Instead he leaned against the horse. "It's fine to be upset, but that won't get you anywhere. You gotta think about what you can learn from this. So far, looks like all you've learned is how to beat up on something that can't beat you back."

I swung and missed. "Look, I get that you're trying to help, but I'm working here."

"That ain't work. That's a whole lot of misplaced anger."

"Well, where am I supposed to place it? On the king's neck? On

Prince Maxon's? On yours?" I swung again and hit. "Because it's not okay. They get away with everything."

"Who does?"

"They do. The Ones. The Twos."

"You're a Two."

I dropped the ax and yelled. "I'm a Six!" I hit my chest. "Underneath whatever uniform they put on me, I'm still a kid from Carolina, and that's not going away."

He shook his head and pulled on the horse's bridle. "Sounds like you need a girl."

"I got a girl," I called at his back.

"Then let her in. You're swinging your fists for the wrong fight."

CHAPTER 3

I LET THE HOT WATER run over me, hoping the day would follow it down the drain. I kept thinking of the stable keeper's words, more angered by what he said than anything else that had happened.

I let America in. I knew what I was fighting for.

I towed off, taking my time, trying to let the routine of getting dressed settle my mind. The starched uniform embraced my skin and with it came a sense of purpose and drive. I had work to do.

There was an order to things, and at the end of the day, Mer would be there.

I tried to stay focused as I walked to the king's office on the third floor. When I knocked, Lodge opened the door. We nodded at each other as I entered the room. I didn't always feel intimidated by the king, but within these walls I could watch as he changed thousands of lives with the flick of his finger.

"And we'll ban the cameras from the palace until further notice," King Clarkson said as an advisor took notes furiously. "I'm sure the girls have learned a lesson today, but tell Silvia to up the work on their decorum." He shook his head. "I can't begin to imagine what possessed that girl to do something so stupid. She was the favorite."

Maybe your favorite, I thought, crossing the room. His desk was wide and dark, and I quietly reached for the bin that held his outgoing mail.

"Also, make sure we keep an eye on that girl who ran."

My ears perked up, and I moved slower.

The advisor shook his head. "No one even noticed her, Your Majesty. Girls are such temperamental creatures; if anyone asked, you could just blame it on her erratic emotions."

The king paused, pushing back in his chair. "Perhaps. Even Amberly has her moments. Still, I never liked the Five. She was a throwaway, never should have made it this far."

His advisor nodded thoughtfully. "Why don't you simply send her home? Concoct a reason to eliminate her? Surely it could be done."

"Maxon would know. He watches those girls like a hawk. No matter," the king said, snapping back to his desk. "She's clearly not qualified, and sooner or later it will all surface. We'll get aggressive if we have to. Moving on, where was that letter from the Italians?"

I scooped up the mail and gave a quick unacknowledged bow before leaving the room. I wasn't sure how to feel. I wanted America

as far away from Maxon's hands as possible. But the way King Clarkson talked about the Selection made me think there was something more there, maybe something dark. Could America fall victim to one of his whims? And if America was a "throwaway," was she here by design? Brought specifically to be dismissed? If so, was there one girl who was expressly meant to be chosen? Was she still here?

At least I'd have something to think about while I stood outside America's door all night.

I thumbed through the mail, reading addresses as I walked.

In the small post room, three older men sorted the incoming and outgoing mail. There was one bin marked selected that spilled over with letters from admirers. I wasn't sure how much of that the girls ever saw.

"Hey there, Leger. How you doing?" Charlie asked.

"Not great," I confessed, placing the mail in his hands, not risking it being lost in a pile.

"We've all seen better days, haven't we? At least they're alive."

"Did you hear about the girl who ran for them?" Mertin asked, spinning around in his chair. "Isn't that something?"

Cole turned, too. He was a pretty quiet guy, perfectly suited for the mail room, but even he was curious about this.

Nodding, I crossed my arms. "Yeah, I heard."

"What do you think?" Charlie asked.

I shrugged. It seemed that most people felt that America had acted heroically, but I knew that if anyone said that in front of someone who devoutly adored King Clarkson, they might find themselves in serious trouble. For now, neutrality was best.

"The whole thing is a little crazy." I'd leave the perception of crazy good or crazy bad to him.

"Can't deny that," Mertin commented.

"Gotta get to my rounds," I said, ending the conversation. "See you tomorrow, Charlie." I gave him a little salute and he smiled.

"Stay safe."

I went down the hall to the storeroom to grab my staff, though I didn't see the purpose behind it. I preferred the gun.

As I rounded the stairs and landed on the second floor, I saw Celeste coming toward me. The moment she recognized my face, her whole demeanor shifted. It seemed that unlike her mother, she was at least capable of feeling shame.

She walked up to me cautiously, then stopped. "Officer."

"Miss." I bowed.

Her features looked sharp as she stood there, thinking over her words. "I just wanted to make sure that you knew the conversation we

had last night was meant to be purely professional.”

I nearly laughed in her face. Her hands might have stayed safely on my back and arms, but there was no mistaking the flirtation in her touch. She had been walking the line of breaking the rules herself. After I told her I had been a Six before becoming a guard, she suggested I look into modeling instead of staying in the service.

Her exact words had been, “If this doesn’t work out for me, we’re one and the same now. Look me up when you’re out.”

Celeste wasn’t the kind of girl to wait around, so I didn’t think she was truly attached to me in any way, and I suspected that her lips were especially loose last night because she’d had a little too much to drink. But there was one thing that was absolutely clear after our conversation: she didn’t love Maxon. Not even close.

“Of course,” I answered, knowing better.

“I simply wanted to give you career advice. Such a serious caste jump is hard to adjust to. And I wish you luck, but I want to be clear that my affections are singularly devoted to Prince Maxon.”

I nearly called her on it. I was so close. But I saw the desperation in her eyes mixing with a consuming fear. In the end, if I accused her, I would accuse myself. I knew Maxon didn’t matter to her, and I wasn’t sure if any of these girls mattered to him—at least, not the way they should—but where would condemning her or playing some game get any of us?

“And I am wholly dedicated to protecting him. Good evening, miss.”

I could see the lingering question in her eyes, and I knew she wasn’t completely satisfied with my answer. But nothing could benefit a girl like that more than a little fear.

Inhaling, I rounded the corner to America’s room, aching to walk in. I wanted to hold her, to talk to her. I stopped in front of the door and put my ear to it. I could hear her maids, so I knew she wasn’t alone. But then I could make out her hitched breaths, the sniffs of her tired crying.

I couldn’t handle the fact that she’d been crying all day. That was the last straw.

I’d promised her parents that Maxon favored her, and that she would be comforted. If she was still in tears, then he’d done nothing for her. If I wasn’t meant to have her, he’d sure as hell better treat her like a princess. So far, he was failing catastrophically.

I knew—I *knew*—she was supposed to be mine.

I knocked on the door, not giving a damn about the consequences. Lucy answered, and she gave me a hopeful smile. That alone made me think I could be of help.

“I’m sorry to disturb you, ladies, but I heard the crying and wanted

to make sure you were all right.” I gently moved past Lucy, walking as close to America’s bed as I dared. Our eyes locked, and she looked so helpless there, it was all I could do not to steal her away from this place.

“Lady America, I’m very sorry about your friend. I heard she was something special. If you need anything, I’m here.”

She was silent, but I could see in her gaze that she was taking every tiny memory of our last two years and stringing them together with the future we’d always hoped to have.

“Thank you.” Her voice was both timid and hopeful. “Your kindness means a great deal to me.”

I gave her the smallest of smiles while inside my heart was thrashing. I’d studied her face in a dozen shades of light, in a thousand stolen moments. With her words, I knew without a doubt: she loved me.

CHAPTER 4

AMERICA LOVES ME. America loves me. America loves me.

I had to get her alone, really alone. It would take some work, but I could make it happen.

Hours before my shift started the next morning, I was ready to go. I looked over all the guard posts, the cleaning rotations, the meal schedules for the royal family, the officers, and the help. I studied it until the lines overlapped in my head and I could see all the holes in the security. Sometimes I wondered if the other guards did this, too, or if I was the only one who looked close enough.

Either way, I had a plan. I just needed to get word to her.

My afternoon post was in the king's office, where I had the extraordinarily boring job of standing guard by the door. I liked being on the move, or at least in a more open part of the palace. Honestly, anywhere away from the cold gaze of King Clarkson.

I watched Maxon attempt to work. He looked distracted today, sitting at his small desk that seemed thrown in the room as an afterthought. I couldn't help but think that he was an idiot for being so careless with America.

Midmorning, Smiths, one of the guards who'd been at the palace for years, came rushing in. He darted over to the king, bowing quickly.

"Your Majesty, two of the Elite, Lady Newsome and Lady Singer, just got in a fight."

Everyone in the room paused, looking at the king.

He sighed. "Yelling like cats again?"

"No, sir. They're in the hospital wing. There was a little blood."

King Clarkson looked to Maxon. "No doubt that Five is responsible for this. You can't be serious about her."

Maxon stood. "Father, all of their nerves are frayed after yesterday. I'm certain they're having a difficult time processing the caning."

The king pointed a finger. "If she started it, she's gone. You know that."

"And if it was Celeste?" he countered.

"I doubt a girl of such high caliber would stoop so low without provocation."

"Still, would you dismiss her?" Maxon shot back.

"It wasn't her fault."

Maxon stood. "I'll get to the bottom of this. I'm sure it was

nothing.”

My mind was spinning. I didn't get him. He clearly wasn't treating America as well as he ought to, so why was he so determined to keep her? And if he failed to prove she wasn't at fault, would there be enough time for me to see her before she left?

The rumor mill at the palace was fast. In no time at all, I learned Celeste threw the first words, but Mer threw the first punch. I swear, I wanted to give my girl a medal. They were both staying—it seemed their actions canceled each other out—though it sounded like America was doing so begrudgingly.

Hearing those words made my heart even surer I'd gotten her back.

I ran to my room, trying to squeeze everything I needed to do into the few minutes I had. I scribbled the note as clearly and quickly as possible. Then I moved up to the second floor, waiting in a hallway until I saw America's maids leave to eat. When I got to her room, I debated over where to leave the letter, but there was really only one place to put it. I just hoped she'd see it.

As I made my way back into the main hallway, fate smiled on me. America didn't look like she was bleeding, so she must have left marks on Celeste. As she got closer, I could make out a small, swollen patch of skin almost completely covered by her hair. But past all that, I saw the excitement in her eyes the second she knew it was me.

God, I wished I could just sit with her. I breathed. Restraint now would mean real privacy later.

I stopped as we came close, bowing. “Jar.”

I straightened and left, but I knew that she had heard. After a moment of thought, she nearly ran down the hall without a look back.

I smiled, happy to see the life come back to her. That was my girl.

“Dead?” the king asked. “By whose hand?”

“We're not sure, Your Majesty. But we could expect no less from down-casted sympathizers,” his advisor said.

Walking in quietly to get the mail, I instantly knew he was talking about all the people in Bonita. Over three hundred families had recently been demoted at least a caste for their suspected support of the rebels. It seemed they weren't taking it without a fight.

King Clarkson shook his head before suddenly slamming his hand on the table. I jumped along with everyone else in the room.

“Don't these people see what they're doing? They're tearing apart everything we've worked for, and for what? To pursue interests they might fail in? I've offered them security. I've offered them *order*. And they rebel.”

Of course the man with everything he could ever need or want didn't understand why any average person might want the same

chance.

When I was drafted, I had been simultaneously terrified and thrilled. I knew that some considered it a death sentence. But at least the life in front of me would be more exciting than the paperwork and housework I faced if I had stayed in Carolina. Besides, it wasn't much of a life anyway after America left.

King Clarkson stood, pacing. "These people have to be stopped. Who's running Bonita now?"

"Lamay. He's chosen to move his family to another location for the time being, and has started funeral arrangements for former Governor Sharpe. He seems to be proud of his new role, despite the obstacles."

The king held out his hand. "There. A man accepting his lot in life, doing his duty for the general public. Why can't they all do that?"

I scooped up the mail, close to the king as he spoke.

"We'll have Lamay eliminate any suspected assassins immediately. Even if he misses the mark, we'll send a clear warning. And let's find a way to reward anyone with information. We need to get some people in the South in our pocket."

I turned quickly, wishing I hadn't heard. I didn't support the rebels. More often than not, they were killers. But the king's actions today had nothing to do with justice.

"You there. Stop."

I looked back, not sure if the king was talking to me. He was, and I watched as he scrawled a brief letter, folded it, and added it to the pile.

"Take this with the post. The boys in the mail room will have the correct address." The king flung it onto the pile in my arms carelessly, like it held nothing of value. I stood there, immobile, unable to carry that load. "Go on," he finally said, and as always, I obeyed.

I took the pile and moved at a snail's pace toward the mail room.

This is none of your business, Aspen. You're here to protect the monarchy. This does that. Focus on America. Let the world go to hell around you so long as you can get to her.

I straightened and did what I must.

"Hey, Charlie."

He whistled as he took in the stack. "Busy day today."

"Looks like it. Um, there was this one . . . the king didn't have the address on hand, said you'd have it." I pointed to Lamay's letter on top.

Charlie flipped open the letter to see where it should go, scanning it quickly. By the end he looked troubled. He checked behind him before lifting his eyes to me. "Did you read this?" he asked quietly.

I shook my head. I swallowed, feeling guilty for not admitting that I already knew the contents. Maybe I could have stopped it, but I was

only doing my job.

"Hmm," Charlie mumbled, quickly spinning in his chair and running into a stack of sorted mail.

"Come on, Charles!" Mertin complained. "That took me three hours!"

"Sorry about that. I'll tidy it up. Say, Leger, two things." Charlie picked up a lone envelope. "This came for you."

I immediately recognized Mom's handwriting. "Thank you." I clung to the paper, desperate for news.

"Not a problem," he replied casually, picking up a wire basket. "And could you do me a favor and take this scrap paper for the furnace? Should probably go in right away."

"Sure thing."

Charlie nodded, and I tucked my letter away to get a better hold of the basket.

The furnaces were near the soldiers' quarters, and I set the basket down before carefully opening the door. The embers were low, so I tossed the papers in gingerly, leaving room for air to get to them.

If I hadn't needed to be so careful, I probably wouldn't have noticed the letter to Lamay stuck in with the empty envelopes and scraps of miswritten addresses.

Charlie, what were you thinking?

I stood there, debating. If I took it back, he would know he'd been caught. Did I want him to know he was caught? Did I want him to be caught at all?

I threw the letter in, watching to make sure it burned. I'd done my job, and the rest of the mail would go out. There would be no place to put blame, and who knew how many lives would be spared?

There'd been enough death, enough pain.

I walked away, washing my hands of it all. True justice would come eventually, to whomever was right or wrong in that situation. Because just now, it was hard to tell.

Back in my room, I tore into my letter, eager to hear from home. I didn't like Mom being without me. It was a small comfort that I could send her money, but I always worried for my family's safety.

It seemed the feeling was mutual.

I know you love her. But don't be stupid.

Of course she was two steps ahead of me, guessing things without prompting. She knew about America before I told her, knew how angry I was about things when I'd never said a word. And here she was, a country away, warning me to not do what she was positive I would.

I stared at paper. The king looked to be in the middle of a vicious streak, but I was sure I could keep out of his grasp. And my mother

had never steered me wrong, but she didn't know how good I was at my job. I ripped the letter up and dropped it in the furnace on my way to meet America.

CHAPTER 5

I HAD TIMED IT PERFECTLY. If America made it within the next five minutes, no one would be aware of either of us. I knew what I was risking, but I couldn't stay away from her. I needed her.

The door creaked open then quickly shut. "Aspen?"

I'd heard her voice like that so often before. "Just like old times, eh?"

"Where are you?" I stepped from behind the curtain and heard her draw in a breath. "You startled me," she said playfully.

"Wouldn't be the first time, won't be the last."

America was many things, but stealthy wasn't one of them. As she tried to meet me in the middle of the room, she hit a sofa, two side tables, and tripped over the edge of a rug. I didn't want to make her nervous, but she really needed to be more careful.

"Shhh! The entire palace is going to know we're in here if you keep pushing things over," I whispered, more teasing than warning.

She giggled. "Sorry. Can't we turn on a light?"

"No." I moved into a more direct path for her. "If someone sees it shining under the door, we might get caught. This corridor isn't checked a lot, but I want to be smart."

She finally reached me, and everything in the world felt better the second I touched her skin. I held her for a second before ushering her to the corner.

"How did you even know about this room?"

I shrugged. "I'm a guard. And I'm very good at what I do. I know the entire grounds of the palace, inside and out. Every last pathway, all the hiding spots, and even most of the secret rooms. I also happen to know the rotations of the guards, which areas are usually the least checked, and the points in the day when the guards are at their fewest. If you ever want to sneak around the palace, I'm the guy to do it with."

In a single word, she was incredulous and proud. "Unbelievable."

I gave her a gentle tug, and she sat with me, the tiny scrap of moonlight barely making her visible. She smiled before turning serious.

"Are you sure this is safe?" I knew she was seeing Woodwork's backside and Marlee's hands, thinking about the shame and loss that would be waiting if we were discovered. And that was if we were lucky. But I had faith in my skills.

“Trust me, Mer. An extraordinary number of things would have to happen for someone to find us here. We’re safe.”

The doubt didn’t leave her eyes, but when I wrapped an arm around her, she fell into me, needing this moment as much as I did.

“How are you doing?” It was nice to finally ask.

Her sigh was so heavy it rattled me. “Okay, I guess. I’ve been sad a lot, and angry.” She didn’t seem to realize that her hand had instinctively gone to the patch of skin just above my knee, the exact place where she used to fiddle with the frayed hole on my jeans. “Mostly I wish I could undo the last two days and get Marlee back. Carter, too, and I didn’t even know him.”

“I did. He’s a great guy.” His family flitted through my mind, and I wondered how they were surviving without their main provider. “I heard he was telling Marlee he loved her the whole time and trying to help her get through it.”

“He was. At least in the beginning anyway. I got hauled off before it was over.”

I smiled and kissed the top her head. “Yeah, I heard about that, too.” The second after I said it, I wondered why I didn’t say that I *saw* it. I’d known what she did before the staff started whispering about it. But that seemed to be the way I took it in: through everyone else’s surprise and, usually, admiration. “I’m proud you went out with a fight. That’s my girl.”

She leaned in even closer. “My dad was proud, too. The queen said I shouldn’t act that way, but she was glad I did. It’s been confusing. Like it was almost a good idea but not really, and then it didn’t fix anything anyway.”

I held her tight, not wanting her to doubt what seemed natural to her. “It was good. It meant a lot to me.”

“To you?”

It was awkward to admit my worries, but she had to know. “Yeah. Every once in a while I wonder if the Selection has changed you. You’ve been so taken care of, and everything is so fancy. I keep wondering if you’re the same America. That let me know that you are, that they haven’t gotten to you.”

“Oh, they’re getting to me all right, but not like that,” she spat, her voice sharp. “Mostly this place reminds me that I wasn’t born to do this.”

Then her anger faded to sadness, and she turned toward me, burrowing her head into my chest, like if she tried hard enough she could hide under my ribs. I wanted to keep her in my arms, so close to my heart that she could practically be a part of it, and bat away all the pain that might come her way.

“Listen, Mer,” I started, knowing the only way to get to the good

would be to walk through the bad. “The thing about Maxon is that he’s an actor. He’s always putting on this perfect face, like he’s so above everything. But he’s just a person, and he’s as messed up as anyone is. I know you cared about him or you wouldn’t have stayed here. But you have to know now that it’s not real.”

She nodded, and I felt like this wasn’t entirely new information to her, like a part of her always expected this.

“It’s better you know now. What if you got married and then found out it was like this?”

“I know,” she breathed. “I’ve been thinking about that myself.”

I tried not to focus on the fact that she’d already wondered about a life married to Maxon. It was part of the experience. Sooner or later, she was bound to think about it. But that had passed.

“You’ve got a big heart, Mer. I know you can’t just get over things, but it’s okay to *want* to. That’s all.”

She was quiet, thinking over my words. “I feel so stupid.”

“You’re not stupid,” I disagreed.

“I am, too.”

I needed to make her smile. “Mer, do you think I’m smart?”

Her tone was light. “Of course.”

“That’s because I am. And I’m way too smart to be in love with a stupid girl. So you can drop that right now.”

She gave a laugh like a whisper but it was enough to pierce through the sadness. I’d had my own aches because of the Selection, and I needed to try to understand hers better. She didn’t ask to put her name in the lottery. I did. This was my fault.

A dozen times, I’d wanted to explain myself, to beg for the mercy that she’d already given. I didn’t deserve it. Maybe now. Maybe this was the time that I could finally, really apologize.

“I feel like I’ve hurt you so much,” she said, shame covering her voice. “I don’t understand how you can still possibly be in love with me.”

I sighed. She acted like she needed forgiveness, when it was certainly the other way around.

I didn’t know how to explain this to her. There weren’t words wide enough to hold what I felt for her. Not even I could make sense of it.

“It’s just the way it is. The sky is blue, the sun is bright, and Aspen endlessly loves America. It’s how the world was designed to be.” I felt the lift of her cheek against my chest as she smiled. If I couldn’t bring myself to apologize, maybe I could at least make it clear that those last minutes in the tree house were a fluke. “Seriously, Mer, you’re the only girl I ever wanted. I couldn’t imagine being with anyone else. I’ve been trying to prepare myself for that, just in case, and . . . I can’t.”

When the words failed, our bodies spoke. No kisses, nothing more

than hushed embraces, but it was all we needed. I felt everything I had felt back in Carolina, and I was sure that we could be that again. Maybe be even more.

"We shouldn't stay much longer," I said, wishing it wasn't true. "I'm pretty confident in my abilities, but I don't want to push it."

She reluctantly stood, and I pulled her in for one last embrace, hoping it would be enough to sustain me until I could see her again. She held on tightly, like she was afraid to let me go. I knew the coming days would be hard for her, but whatever happened, I'd be here.

"I know it's hard to believe, but I'm really sorry Maxon turned out to be such a bad guy. I wanted you back, but I didn't want you to get hurt. Especially not like that."

"Thanks," she mumbled.

"I mean it."

"I know you do." She hesitated. "It's not over though. Not if I'm still here."

"Yeah, but I know you. You'll ride it out so your family gets money and you can see me, but he'd have to reverse time to fix this." I settled my chin on her head, keeping her as close to me for as long as I could. "Don't worry, Mer. I'll take care of you."

CHAPTER 6

I HAD A VAGUE SENSE that I was dreaming. America was across the room, tied to a throne, and Maxon had one hand on her shoulder, trying to push her into submission. Her worried eyes were locked on mine, and she struggled to get to me. But then I saw Maxon was watching me, too. His stare was menacing, and he looked so much like his father in that moment.

I knew I needed to get to her, to untie her so we could run. But I couldn't move. I was tied up, too, on the rack like Woodwork. Fear ran down my skin, cold and demanding. No matter how we tried we would never be able to save each other.

Maxon walked over to a pillow, picked up an elaborate crown, and brought it back to place on America's head. Though she eyed it warily, she didn't fight when he set it on her gleaming red hair. But it wouldn't stay put. It slipped over and over.

Undeterred, Maxon reached into his pocket and pulled out what looked like a two-pronged hook. He lined up the crown and pushed the hook in, affixing it to America's head. As the pin went in, I felt two massive stabs in my back and screamed from the burn of it. I waited to feel the blood, too, but it didn't come.

Instead, I watched as the blood spilled from the pins in America's head, mixing with the red of her hair and sticking to her skin. Maxon smiled as he shoved in pin after pin, and I yelled in pain every time one pierced America's skin, watching, horrified, as the blood from the crown drowned her.

I snapped awake. I hadn't had a nightmare like that in months, and never one about America. I wiped the sweat from my forehead, reminding myself that it wasn't real. Still, the pain from the hooks echoed on my skin, and I felt dizzy.

Instantly, my mind went to Woodwork and Marlee. In my dream, I would happily have taken all the pain if it meant America didn't have to suffer. Had Woodwork felt the same way? Had he wished he could have taken twice the punishment to spare Marlee?

"You all right, Leger?" Avery asked. The room was still dark, so he must have heard me tossing.

"Yeah. Sorry. Bad dream."

"It's cool. Not sleeping that great myself."

I rolled to face him even though I couldn't see a thing. Only senior officers had rooms with windows.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"I don't know. Would it be okay if I thought out loud for a minute?"

"Sure." Avery had been a great friend. The least I could do was spare him a few minutes of my sleep.

I heard him sit up, deliberating before he spoke. "I've been thinking about Woodwork and Marlee. And about Lady America."

"What about her?" I asked, sitting up myself.

"At first when I saw Lady America run for Marlee, I was pissed. Because shouldn't she know better? Woodwork and Marlee made a mistake, and they had to be punished. The king and Prince Maxon have to keep control, right?"

"Okay."

"But when the maids and butlers were talking about it, they were kind of praising Lady America. It didn't make sense to me because I thought what she did was wrong. But, well, they've been here a lot longer than we have. Maybe they've seen a lot more. Maybe they know something.

"And if they do, and they think Lady America was right to do what she did . . . then what am I missing?"

We were treading dangerous ground here. But he was my friend, the best I'd ever had. I trusted Avery with my life, and the palace was one place where I could really use an ally.

"That's a really good question. Makes you wonder."

"Exactly. Like sometimes when I'm on guard in the king's office, the prince will be working and then leave to do something. King Clarkson will pick up Prince Maxon's work and undo half of it. Why? Couldn't he at least talk to him about it? I thought he was training him."

"I don't know. Control?" As I said the word, I realized that had to be at least partially true. Sometimes I suspected Maxon didn't completely know what was going on. "Maybe Maxon isn't as competent as the king thinks he should be by now."

"What if the prince is *more* competent and the king doesn't like it?"

I held back the laugh. "Hard to believe. Maxon seems easily distracted."

"Hmm." Avery shifted in the dark. "Maybe you're right. It just seems like people feel differently about him than the king. And they talk about Lady America like if they could pick the princess, it would be her. If she's the type to disobey like that, does it mean that Prince Maxon would, too?"

His questions hit on things I didn't want to acknowledge. Could Maxon in fact be pushing against his father? And if that was the case, was he also pushing against the crown and all it stood for? I'd never

been a fan of the monarchy; I didn't think I could seriously hate anyone who fought it.

But my love for America was bigger than everything else, and because Maxon stood between me and that love, I didn't think there was anything he could say or do that would make me consider him a decent person.

"I really don't know," I answered honestly. "He didn't stop what happened to Woodwork."

"Yeah, but that doesn't mean he liked it." Avery yawned. "I'm just saying, we've been trained to watch every person who comes into the palace and to look for any hidden intentions. Maybe we should do the same with the people who are already here."

I smiled. "You might be on to something there," I admitted.

"Of course. I'm the brains of this whole operation." He rustled with his blankets, settling again.

"Go to sleep, brainiac. We'll need your smarts tomorrow," I teased.

"On it." He was still for maybe a whole minute before he piped up again. "Hey, thanks for listening."

"Anytime. What are friends for?"

"Yeah." He yawned again. "I miss Woodwork."

I sighed. "I know. I miss him, too."

CHAPTER 7

I DIDN'T MIND THE INJECTIONS so much, but they stung like hell for about an hour afterward. What was worse, they gave you this strange pulsing energy that lasted for most of the day. It wasn't uncommon to find a handful of guards running laps for hours or picking up some of the more laborious chores around the palace just to help burn it off. Doctor Ashlar made a point to limit the number of guards receiving them on any given day.

"Officer Leger," Doctor Ashlar called, and I went into the office and stood by the small examining table near his desk. The hospital wing was large enough to accommodate us, but this felt better done in private.

He nodded to acknowledge me, and I turned and pulled the waist of my pants down a few inches. I refused to allow myself to jump, not when the cold antiseptic swiped across my skin or when the needle pierced it.

"All done," he said cheerfully. "See Tom for your vitamins and compensation."

"Yes, sir. Thank you."

Every step throbbed, but I didn't let it show.

Tom gave me some pills and water, and after I downed them, I initialed his little paper and took my money, dropping it in my room before I headed out to the woodpile. Already, the urge to move was overwhelming.

Each swing of the ax brought a desperately needed release. I felt hypercharged today, fueled by the injections, Avery's questions, and that sinister dream.

I thought about the king saying that America was a throw-away. It seemed unlikely that America would win now when she was so upset with Maxon, but I wondered what would happen if the one person the king never intended to get the crown did?

And if Marlee had been a favorite, maybe even the king's personal pick to win, who was he pinning his hopes on now?

I tried to concentrate, but my thoughts blurred together under the insatiable drive to move. I swung and swung, and only stopped two hours later because there was nothing left to chop.

"There's a whole forest back there if you need some more."

I turned, and that old stable keeper was there, smiling.

"I think I might actually be done," I answered. As I got ahold of my

breathing, I was sure the worst of the injection's effects had passed.

He walked closer. "You look better. Calmer."

I laughed, feeling the medicine evening out in my bloodstream. "It was a different energy I needed to burn off today."

He sat on the chopping block, looking completely at home. I had no idea what to make of this guy.

I rubbed my sweaty palms on my pants, trying to think of what to say. "Hey, I'm sorry about the other day. Didn't mean to give you a hard time, I—"

He held up his hands. "It's no problem. And I didn't mean to be pushy. But I've seen a lot of people let the bad around them make them hard or stubborn. In the end, they miss the chance to make their world better because they only see the worst in it."

There was still something about the tone of his voice and his features that made me feel like I knew him.

"I know what you mean." I shook my head. "I don't want to be like that. But I get so angry. Sometimes I feel like I know too much, or that I've done things I can't make right, and it just hovers over me. And when I see things happen that shouldn't . . ."

"You don't know what to do with yourself."

"Exactly."

He nodded. "Well, I'd start by thinking about what's good. Then I'd ask myself how I could make that good even better."

I laughed. "That doesn't make sense."

He stood. "You just think about it a bit."

As I walked back to the palace, I tried to figure out where I might know him from. Maybe he'd passed through Carolina before he worked for the palace. Plenty of Sixes drifted. Wherever he'd been, whatever he'd seen, he hadn't let it bring him down. I should have asked for his name, but we seemed to be running into each other a lot, so I figured we'd meet again soon. When I wasn't in an awful mood, he was actually a pretty decent guy.

After cleaning up, I made my way to my room, still thinking about the stable keeper's words. What was good? How could I make it better?

I picked up the envelope with my money in it. I didn't need to use a cent of it at the palace, so all of it went to my family. Usually.

I scribbled a note to Mom.

Sorry it's not as much this time. Something came up. More next week. Love you, Aspen.

Shoving a little less than half of my earnings in an envelope with the letter, I pushed it aside and pulled out another piece of paper.

I knew Woodwork's address by heart, seeing as I'd written it out for him a dozen times. Illiteracy seemed more common than most people knew, but Woodwork was so worried about people thinking he was stupid or worthless that I was the only guard he'd trusted with his secret.

Depending on lots of things—where you lived, how large your school was, if it was more Seven heavy—a person might make it through a decade of instruction and know next to nothing.

I couldn't say Woodwork slipped through the cracks. He was pushed into a gaping hole.

And now, we had no idea where he was, how he was doing, or if Marlee was even still there for him.

Mrs. Woodwork,

It's Aspen. We're all sorry about your son. I hope you're doing okay. This was the last of his compensation. Just wanted to make sure you got it. Take care.

I debated saying more. I didn't want her to think she was getting charity, so brevity seemed best. But maybe from time to time, I could send her something anonymously.

Family was good, and Woodwork's was still around. I had to try and help them.

CHAPTER 8

I WAITED UNTIL I WAS sure everyone was asleep before I opened America's door. I was thrilled to find her still awake. I'd been wishing she'd wait up for me, and the way she sort of tilted her head and shifted closer made me think she'd hoped I'd be here tonight.

I left the door open as always and bent down by her bed. "How have you been?"

"All right, I suppose." But I could tell she didn't mean that. "Celeste showed me this article today. I'm not sure I want to get into it. I'm so tired of her."

What was it with that girl? Did she think she could torture people and manipulate her way to a crown? Her continued presence here was one more example of Maxon's horrible taste.

"I guess with Marlee gone, he won't be sending anyone home for a while, huh?"

It looked like it took all of her energy to muster up a sad little shrug.

"Hey." I moved a hand to her knee. "It's going to be all right."

She gave me a weak smile. "I know. I just miss her. And I'm confused."

"Confused about what?" I asked, moving to a more comfortable position to listen.

"Everything." Her voice was so desperate. "What I'm doing here, who I am. I thought I knew." She fidgeted her hands, like maybe she could catch the right words. "I don't even know how to explain it right."

I looked at America and realized that losing Marlee and finding out the truth about Maxon's character had exposed her to truths she didn't want to think were out there. It sobered her up—maybe too quickly. She seemed paralyzed now, afraid of taking any kind of step because she didn't know what would fall apart along the way. America had seen me lose my father and deal with Jemmy's beating, and she'd watched as I struggled to keep my family fed and safe. But she'd only *seen* that; she hadn't experienced it. Her family was intact, save her loser brother, and she'd never really lost anything.

Except maybe you, you idiot, a part of me accused. I shook the thought away. This moment was about her, not me.

"You know who you are, Mer. Don't let them try to change you."

She twitched her hand, like she might reach down and touch mine.

She didn't, though.

"Aspen, can I ask you something?" Concern still painted every corner of her face.

I nodded.

"This is kind of strange, but if being the princess didn't mean I had to marry someone, if it was just a job someone could pick me for, do you think I could do it?"

Whatever I had been expecting, that wasn't it. I had a hard time believing she was even still considering becoming the princess. Then again, maybe she wasn't. This was hypothetical, and she'd said to think about it without her being linked to Maxon.

Considering the way she'd handled everything that had happened publicly, I could guess she'd feel helpless when confronted with the things that happened behind closed doors. She was great at a lot of things, but . . .

"Sorry, Mer. I don't. You don't have it in you to be as calculating as they are." I tried to convey that I wasn't insulting her. If anything, I was happy she wasn't that person.

She furrowed her thin eyebrows. "Calculating? How so?"

I exhaled, trying to think of how to explain this without being too specific. "I'm everywhere, Mer. I hear things. There's a lot of turmoil down South, in the areas with a heavy concentration of lower castes. From what the older guards say, those people never particularly agreed with Gregory Illéa's methods, and there's been unrest down there for a long time. Rumor has it, that was part of why the queen was so attractive to the king. She came from the South, and it appeased them for a while. Not so much anymore it seems."

She considered this. "That doesn't explain what you meant by calculating."

How bad could it be if I shared what I knew with her? She kept our relationship a secret for two years. I could trust her. "I was in one of the offices the other day, before all the Halloween stuff. They were mentioning rebel sympathizers in the South. I was told to see these letters to the postal wing safely. It was over three hundred letters, America. Three hundred families who were getting knocked down a caste for not reporting things or for helping someone the palace saw as a threat."

She inhaled sharply, and I watched as dozens of scenarios unfolded in front of her eyes.

"I know. Can you imagine? What if it was you, and all you knew how to do was play the piano? Suddenly you're supposed to know how to do clerical work, how to find those jobs even? It's a pretty clear message."

Her concern shifted. "Do you . . . Does Maxon know?"

That was a good question. "I think he has to. He's not that far off from running the country himself."

She nodded and let that settle in on top of all the other new things she had learned about her sort-of boyfriend.

"Don't tell anyone, okay?" I pleaded. "A slip like that could cost me my job." *And so much more*, I added in my head.

"Of course. It's already forgotten." Her tone was light, trying to mask the weight of her worries. Her efforts made me smile.

"I miss being with you, away from all this. I miss our old problems," I lamented. What wouldn't I give to be irritated about her making me dinner now?

"I know what you mean," she said with a giggle. A real one. "Sneaking out of my window was so much better than sneaking around a palace."

"And scrounging to find a penny for you was better than having nothing to give you at all." I tapped on the jar by her bed. I always took that as a good sign, that she kept it nearby before I was even in the palace. "I had no idea you'd saved them all until the day before you left," I added, remembering in awe the weight of them being poured into my palms.

"Of course I did!" she exclaimed proudly. "When you were away, they were all I had to hold on to. Sometimes I used to pour them over my hand on the bed, just to scoop them up again. It was nice to have something you touched."

She was as bad as I was. I never took anything from her to keep as my own, but I stored up every moment like it was a physical thing. I'd thumb through memories whenever things were still. I spent more time with her than she ever knew.

"What did you do with all of them?" she wondered.

I smiled. "They're at home, waiting." I'd had a small store of money to marry America saved up before she left. These days I had my mom set aside a portion of each paycheck for me, and I was sure she knew what I was putting it toward. But my most precious corner of that stash was the pennies.

"For what?"

For a decent wedding. For actual rings. For a home of our own. "That, I cannot say."

I'd tell her everything soon enough. We were still working our way back to each other.

"Fine, keep your secrets," she said, pretending to be annoyed. "And don't worry about not giving me anything. I'm just happy you're here, that you and I can at least fix things, even if it's not what it used to be."

I frowned. Were we that far from what we once were? So far that

she needed to address it? No. Not to me. We were still those people back in Carolina, and I needed her to remember that.

I wanted to give her the world, but all I had at the moment were the clothes on my back. I looked down, plucked off a button, and held it up to her.

“I literally have nothing else to give you, but you can hold on to this—something I’ve touched—and think of me anytime. And you can know that I’m thinking of you, too.”

She took the tiny, golden button from my hand, and stared at it like I’d given her the moon. Her lip trembled and she breathed slowly, as if she might cry. Maybe I’d done this all wrong.

“I don’t know how to do this right now,” she confessed. “I feel like I don’t know how to do anything. I . . . I haven’t forgotten you, okay? It’s still here.”

She put her hand on her chest, and I saw her fingers dig into her skin, trying to calm whatever was happening inside.

Yes, we still had a long way to go, but I knew it wouldn’t feel that way if we were in it together.

I smiled, needing nothing more. “That’s enough for me.”

CHAPTER 9

I'D HEARD ABOUT THE KING'S tea party for the ladies of the Elite and knew America wouldn't be in her room when I came knocking.

"Officer Leger," Anne said, opening the door with a wide smile. "What a pleasure to see you."

At her words, Lucy and Mary walked over to greet me.

"Hello, Officer Leger," Mary said.

"Lady America is out right now. Tea with the royal family," Lucy added.

"Oh, I know. I was wondering if I could chat with you ladies for a moment."

Anne gestured for me to come in. "Of course."

I made my way to the table, and they hurried to pull out a chair for me. "No," I insisted, "you sit."

Mary and Lucy took the two seats, while Anne and I stood.

I took off my hat and rested a hand on the back of Mary's chair. I wanted them to feel comfortable talking with me, and I hoped dropping a little of the formality would allow for that.

"How can we help you?" Lucy asked.

"I was just doing a security sweep, and I wanted to see if you've noticed anything unusual. Probably sounds silly, but the littlest things can help us keep the Elite safe." There was truth to that, but we weren't exactly charged with seeking out that information.

Anne bowed her head in thought while Lucy's eyes went to the ceiling as she wondered.

"I don't think so," Mary started.

"If anything, Lady America has been less active since Halloween," Anne offered.

"Because of Marlee?" I guessed. They all nodded in answer.

"I'm not sure she's over it," Lucy said. "Not that I blame her."

Anne patted her shoulder. "Of course not."

"So, beyond her trips to the Women's Room and meals, she's more or less staying in her room?"

"Yes," Mary confirmed. "Lady America has done that in the past, but these last few days . . . it's like she just wants to hide."

From that, I deduced two important things. First, America wasn't spending time alone with Maxon anymore. Second, our meetings were still going undetected, even by those closest to her.

Both of those details caused the hope in my heart to swell.

“Is there anything else we should be doing?” Anne asked. I smiled because it was the kind of question I would have asked if I were her, trying to figure out how to get ahead of a problem.

“I don’t think so. Pay attention to things you’re seeing and hearing, as always, and feel free to contact me directly if you think anything is off.”

Their faces were all eager, so ready to please.

“You’re a wonderful soldier, Officer Leger,” Anne said.

I shook my head. “Just doing my job. And, as you know, Lady America is from my province, and I want to look out for her.”

Mary turned to me. “I think it’s so funny that you’re from the same province and you’re basically her personal guard now. Did you live near her in Carolina?”

“Sort of.” I tried to keep our closeness vague.

Lucy smiled brightly. “Did you ever see her when she was younger? What was she like growing up?”

I couldn’t help but grin. “I ran across her a few times. She was a tomboy. Always outside with her brother. Stubborn as a mule, and as I remember, very, very talented.”

Lucy giggled. “So basically the same as ever,” she said, and they all laughed.

“Pretty much,” I confirmed.

Those words made the feeling in my chest grow even more. America was a thousand familiar things, and beneath the ball gowns and jewelry, they were all still there.

“I should get downstairs. I want to make sure to catch the *Report*.” I reached across the girls to pick up my hat.

“Maybe we should come with you,” Mary suggested. “It’s almost time.”

“Certainly.” For the staff, the *Report* was the one time television was permitted, and there were only three places to watch: the kitchen, the workroom where the maids did their sewing, and a large common room that generally turned into another workspace instead of a place to commune. I preferred the kitchen. Anne led the way there, while Mary and Lucy stayed back with me.

“I did hear something about visitors, Officer Leger,” Anne said, pausing for a moment to share. “But that might only be a rumor.”

“No, it’s true,” I answered. “I don’t know any details, but I hear we have two different parties coming.”

“Yay,” Mary said sarcastically, “I know I’m gonna get stuck with tablecloth steaming again. Hey, Anne, whatever you get assigned with, can we trade?” she asked, scurrying up to Anne as they got in a debate over their yet-to-be-determined tasks.

I held out my arm for Lucy. “Madam.”

She smiled and looped her hand through, sticking her nose in the air. "Good sir."

We moved down the hallway. As they chatted about errands that needed to be done and dresses that needed hemming, I realized why I was almost always happiest when I spent time with America's maids.

I could be a Six with them.

I sat on a counter with Lucy on one side and Mary on the other. Anne hovered, shushing people as the *Report* began.

Each time the cameras got a shot of the girls, I could tell something was wrong. America looked dejected. What was worse, I could tell she was trying not to look that way and failing spectacularly.

What was she so worried about?

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Lucy wringing her hands.

"What's wrong?" I whispered.

"Something isn't right with my lady. I can see it in her face." Lucy pulled one hand up to her mouth and started chewing away on a nail. "What's happened to her? Lady Celeste looks like a cat on the prowl. What will we do if she wins?"

I put my hand on the one in her lap, and miraculously, she stilled, looking bewilderedly into my eyes. I got the feeling that people ignored Lucy's nerves.

"Lady America will be fine."

She nodded, comforted by the words. "But I like her," she whispered. "I want her to stay. It seems like everyone leaves when I need them to stay."

So Lucy had lost somebody. Maybe a lot of somebodies. I felt like I understood her anxiety problems a little better.

"Well, you're stuck with me for four years." I gently elbowed her and she smiled, holding the tears in her eyes at bay.

"You're so nice, Officer Leger. We all think so." She dabbed at her lashes.

"Well, I think you ladies are nice, too. I'm always happy to see you."

"We're not ladies," she answered, looking down.

I shook my head. "If Marlee can still be a lady because she sacrificed herself for someone who mattered to her, then you certainly can. The way I see it, you sacrifice your life every day. You give your time and energy to someone else, and that's the exact same thing."

I saw Mary peek over before focusing on the television again. Anne might have noticed my words as well. She looked like she was leaning in to hear.

"You're the best one we have, Officer Leger."

I smiled. "When we're down here, you three can call me Aspen."

CHAPTER 10

STARING AT THE WALL LOST its excitement about thirty minutes in to standing watch. It was well past midnight now, and all I could do was count the hours until sunrise. But at least my boredom meant that America was safe.

The day had been uneventful except for the final confirmation of the coming visitors.

Women. So many women.

Part of me felt encouraged by that news. The ladies who came to the palace tended to be less aggressive physically. But their words could probably start wars if said in the wrong tone.

The members of the German Federation were old friends, so we had that working in our favor securitywise. The Italians were wild cards.

I'd thought of America all night, wondering what her appearance on the *Report* meant. I wasn't sure I wanted to question her about it, though. I'd leave it to her. If she got the chance to share, I'd listen. For now, she needed to focus on what was coming. The longer she stayed at the palace, the longer I had her with me.

I rolled my shoulders, listening to my bones pop. Just a few more hours to go. I straightened and caught a set of blue eyes peeking around the edge of the hallway. "Lucy?"

"Hello," she answered, coming around the corner. Just behind her, Mary followed holding a small basket in her arm, the contents wrapped with cloth.

"Did Lady America ring for you? Is everything all right?" I reached for the handle to open the door for them.

Lucy put a delicate hand on her chest, seeming nervous. "Oh, everything's fine. Um, we were coming to see if you were here."

I squinted, moving my hand back. "Well, I am. Do you need something?"

They looked at each other before Mary spoke up. "We just noticed you've been working a lot of shifts the last few days. We thought you might be hungry."

Mary pulled back the cloth, revealing a small assortment of muffins, pastries, and bread, probably overspill from breakfast preparations.

I gave a half smile. "That's very nice of you, but, one, I'm not supposed to eat while I'm on duty, and, two, you might have noticed

that I'm a pretty strong guy." I flexed my free arm and they giggled. "I can take care of myself."

Lucy tilted her head. "We know you're strong, but accepting help is its own kind of strength."

Her words nearly took the breath out of me. I wished someone had told me that months ago. I could have saved myself so much grief.

I looked at their faces, so much like America's that last night in the tree house: hopeful, excited, warm. My eyes moved to the basket of food. Was I really going to keep doing this? Alienating the few people who genuinely made me feel like myself?

"Here's the deal: if anyone comes, you wrestled me to the ground and forced me to eat. Got it?"

Mary grinned, holding out the basket. "Got it."

I took a piece of cinnamon bread and bit it. "You're gonna eat, too, right?" I asked as I chewed.

Lucy clasped her hands together enthusiastically before hunting through the basket, and Mary quickly followed suit.

"So, how good are your wrestling skills?" I joked. "I mean, I want to make sure we've got our story straight."

Lucy covered her mouth, giggling. "Funny enough, that's not part of our training."

I gasped. "What? This is important stuff here. Cleaning, serving, hand-to-hand combat."

They chuckled as they ate.

"I'm serious. Who's in charge? I'm going to write a letter."

"We'll mention it to the head maid in the morning," Mary promised.

"Good." I took a bite and shook my head in mock outrage.

Mary swallowed. "You're so funny, Officer Leger."

"Aspen."

She smiled again. "Aspen. Are you going to stay when your term is up? I'm sure if you applied, the palace would want you as a permanent guard."

Now that I was a Two, I knew I wanted to keep being a soldier . . . but at the palace?

"I don't think so. My family is back in Carolina, so I'll probably try to serve there if I can."

"That's a shame," Lucy whispered.

"Don't get sad just yet. I still have four years to go."

She gave a tiny smile. "True."

But I could tell she hadn't really shaken it off. I remembered Lucy mentioning earlier that people she cared about tended to leave, and it felt bittersweet that somehow I'd become important to her. She mattered to me, too, of course. So did Anne and Mary. But their

connection to me was almost exclusively through America. How had I become significant to them?

“Do you have a big family?” Lucy asked.

I nodded. “Three brothers: Reed, Becken, and Jemmy, and three sisters: Kamber and Celia, who are twins, and then Ivy is the youngest. Plus my mom.”

Mary started covering the basket again. “What about your dad?”

“He died a few years ago.” I’d finally gotten to a place where I could say that without it tearing me apart. It used to feel crippling, because I still needed him. We all did. But I was lucky. Sometimes fathers would simply disappear in the lower castes, leaving those behind to fend for themselves or sink.

But my dad did everything he could for us, right up until the end. Because we were Sixes, things would always be hard, but he kept us above a line, let us maintain some pride in what we did and who we were. I wanted to be like that.

The paychecks would be nicer at the palace, but I could do a better job of providing if I was at least closer to home.

“I’m sorry,” Lucy said softly. “My mom died a few years ago, too.”

Knowing Lucy lost the most important person in her life reframed her in my mind, pulling everything together.

“Never quite the same, is it?”

She shook her head, eyes focused on the carpet. “But still, we have to look for the good.”

Her face came up, and there was the faintest whisper of hope in her expression. I couldn’t help but stare.

“It’s so funny that you said that.”

She looked to Mary and back to me. “Why?”

I shrugged. “Just is.” I popped the last bite of bread in my mouth and wiped a few crumbs off my fingers. “Thank you, ladies, for the food, but you should go. It’s not exactly safe to be running around the palace at night.”

“Okay,” Mary said. “We should probably start working on those wrestling skills anyway.”

“Go jump on Anne,” I advised her. “Never underestimate the element of surprise.”

She laughed again. “We won’t. Good night, Officer Leger.” She turned to walk down the hall.

“Hold on,” I urged, and they both stopped. I nodded toward the wall that held a secret passage. “Would you take the back way? It’d make me feel a lot better.”

They smiled. “Of course.”

Mary and Lucy waved as they passed, but when they got to the wall and Mary pushed it open, Lucy whispered something to her.

Mary nodded and scurried downstairs, but Lucy came back to me.

She fidgeted with her hands, those little tics surfacing again as she approached.

"I'm not . . . I'm not good at saying things," she admitted, rocking a bit on her feet. "But I wanted to thank you for being so nice to us."

I shook my head. "It's nothing."

"Not to us, it isn't." There was an intensity in her eyes I'd never seen before. "No matter how many times the laundry maids or the kitchen maids tell us we're lucky, it doesn't really feel that way unless someone appreciates you. Lady America does, and none of us were expecting that. But you do it, too."

"You're both kind without even thinking about it." She smiled to herself. "I just thought you should know it was significant. Maybe to Anne more than anyone, but she'd never say it."

I didn't know how to respond. After struggling for a moment, the only thing that came out was, "Thank you."

Lucy nodded and, not sure what else to say, headed for the passage.

"Good night, Miss Lucy."

She turned back, looking like I'd given her the best present in the world. "Good night, Aspen."

When she left, my thoughts turned back to America. She'd looked so upset today, but I wondered if she had any idea how her attitude changed the people around her. Her dad was right: she was too good for this place.

I'd have to find a time to tell her how she was helping people without even knowing it. For now, I hoped she was resting, unworried about whatever had—

I whipped my head, watching as three butlers ran past, one tripping a bit as he moved. I was walking to the edge of the hall to see what they were running from when the siren sounded.

I'd never heard it before tonight, but I knew what that sound meant: rebels.

I sprinted back and burst into America's room. If people were running, maybe we were already behind.

"Damn it, damn it, damn it," I muttered. She needed to get dressed fast.

"Huh?" she said sleepily.

Clothes. I needed to find clothes. "Get up, Mer! Where are your damn shoes?"

She flicked her blanket off and stepped right into them. "Here. I need my robe," she added, pointing as she adjusted her shoes. I was glad she understood the urgency so quickly.

I found the bundled fabric at the end of her bed and tried to make

heads or tails of it.

"Don't bother, I'll carry it." She pulled it out of my hands, and I rushed her to the door.

"You need to hurry," I warned. "I don't know how close they are."

She nodded. I could feel the adrenaline pulsing through me, and though I knew better, I jerked her back, embracing her in the dark.

I pushed my lips to hers, locking her to me with a hand knotted into her hair. Stupid. So, so stupid. But right in a thousand ways. It felt like an eternity had passed since we'd kissed this deeply, but we fell into it so easily. Her lips were warm, and the familiar taste of her skin lingered in them. Underneath the faintest hint of vanilla, I could smell her, too, the natural scent that clung to her hair and cheeks and neck.

I would have stayed there all night, and sensed she might have done the same, but I needed her to get to the safe room.

"Go. Now," I ordered, pushing her into the hallway, not looking back as I rounded the corner to face whatever was waiting for me.

I unholstered my gun, checking in both directions for anything out of place. I saw the swish of a maid's skirt as she ducked into one of the secret safe rooms. I hoped that Lucy and Mary had already made their way to Anne and were hidden in their quarters, far away from danger.

Hearing the unmistakable sound of shots being fired, I ran down the hall toward the main stairwell. It sounded like the rebels were contained to the first floor, at least, so I knelt at the corner of the wall, watching the curve of the steps, waiting.

A moment later, someone ran up the stairs. It took less than a second for me to identify the man as an intruder. I aimed and fired, hitting him in the arm. With a grunt the rebel fell back, and I saw a guard bolting up to capture him.

A crash down the hall told me that the rebels had found the side staircase and had made their way to the second floor.

"If you find the king, kill him. Take what you can carry. Let them know we've been here!" someone yelled.

I moved as quietly as I could toward the resounding cheers, ducking into corners and surveying the hallway repeatedly. On one of the peeks back, I noticed two more uniforms. I motioned for them to get low and move slowly. As they got closer, I saw it was Avery and Tanner. I couldn't have asked for better backup. Avery was a hell of a shot, and Tanner always went above and beyond because he had more than most of us to lose if he didn't.

Tanner was one of the few officers who came into the service married. He had told us again and again how his wife complained that he wore his wedding ring on his thumb, but it was his grandfather's, and they had no means to resize it. He promised her it was the first

thing he'd spend his money on when he got home, along with a better ring for her while he was at it.

She was his America. He was always focused because of her.

"What's going on?" Avery whispered.

"I think I just heard their leader. Ordered men to kill the king and steal what they could."

Tanner stood, holding his gun by his ear. "We need to find them, make sure they're heading up and away from the safe room."

I nodded. "There might be more than we can handle, but if we stay low, I think—"

At the other end of the hall, a door crashed open, and a butler raced out with two rebels behind him. It was the young butler, the one from the kitchen. He looked lost and horrified. The rebels were holding what looked like farm tools, so at least they wouldn't be able to fire back at us.

I turned, steadied my weight, and aimed. "Down!" I shouted, and the butler obeyed. I shot, hitting one of the rebels in his leg. Avery got the other, but his shot, intentional or not, looked much more deadly.

"I'm going to secure them," Avery said. "Find the leader."

I watched the butler stand and bolt for a bedroom, not caring that anyone could easily get in or out. He needed the illusion of safety.

I heard more shouts, more guns going off, and knew this was going to be one of the bad attacks. My mind became sharp, more focused. I had one mission, and that was all I could see.

Tanner and I crept up to the third floor, finding several side tables, art pieces, and plants already demolished. A rebel, using something like lumpy paint he must have brought with him, was writing something into the wall. I quickly moved up behind him and butted him in the head with the handle of my gun. He dropped, and I bent to check him for weapons.

A second later, a fresh wave of gunshots came at the other end of the hall, and Tanner dragged me behind a turned-up couch. When the noise died, we peeked out to assess the damage.

"I count six," he said.

"Same. I can get two, maybe three."

"That's enough. Remainders might rush. Or have guns."

I looked around. Taking a shard of broken mirror, I cut part of the couch's upholstery off and wrapped it around the glass. "Use this if they get too close."

"Nice," Tanner commented, then aimed his gun. I did the same.

The shots were quick, and we each took out two rebels before the two others turned, running toward us, not away. Remembering orders to keep rebels alive for questioning, I aimed at their legs, but with them moving so frantically, my shots all missed.

Tanner and I watched as a hulking man lumbered down Tanner's side of the hall, while an older guy, wiry and wild-eyed, came toward me. I holstered my gun, preparing myself for a fight.

"Damn. You got the good one," Tanner commented before launching himself over the chair and running full speed at his opponent.

I was a split second behind him. The older rebel came at me, yelling with his hands stretched out like claws. I grabbed one of his arms while using my makeshift knife to cut at his chest.

He wasn't the strongest thing, and part of me actually pitied him. When I latched on to his arm, I could feel his bones far too easily.

He whimpered and fell to his knees, and I pulled his arms behind him, securing both those and his legs with restraining bands. As I was tying them together, someone grabbed me from behind and slammed me into a nearby portrait, cutting my forehead on the glass.

I was dizzy and the blood was already leaking into my eyes, making it harder for me to face my enemy. I felt a thrill of panic before my training came back to me. I crouched as he held on to me from behind, and used my leverage to flip him over my shoulder.

Though he was much bigger than me, he crashed onto the debris-covered floor. I reached for more restraining bands only to collapse as another rebel barged into me.

I was pinned to the floor, my arms held down by a large man straddling my stomach.

His breath was swampy and foul as he spoke into my face.

"Take me to the king," he ordered, his voice like gravel.

I shook my head.

He released my arms, grabbing fistfuls of my jacket, and I reached up to push at his face. But he pulled me up by my clothes and slammed my head into the floor, making me drop my hands to the ground instantly. My head swam and my breathing felt off. The rebel palmed my skull, forcing me to face him.

"Where. Is. The. King?"

"Don't know," I gasped, fighting the ache in my head.

"Come on, pretty boy," he teased. "Give me the king, and I might let you live."

I couldn't mention the safe room. Even if I hated the things the king did, giving him away meant giving America away, and that was not an option.

I could lie. Maybe buy myself enough time to get out of this.

Or I could die.

"Fourth floor," I lied. "Hidden room in the east wing. Maxon's there, too."

He smiled, his disgusting breath coming out with his short laugh.

“Now, that wasn’t so hard, was it?”

I stayed silent.

“Maybe if you’d told me the first time I asked, I wouldn’t have to do this.”

He laced his hands gruffly around my throat, squeezing. On top of my already cloudy head, this was torture. My legs flailed, and I bucked my hips, trying to throw him off. It was pointless. He was simply too big.

I felt my limbs stop working, all oxygen escaping my system.

Who would tell my mother?

Who would take care of my family?

. . . at least I kissed America one last time.

. . . one last time.

. . . time.

Through the haze, I heard the gun go off and felt the massive rebel go limp and fall to the side. My throat made bizarre noises as it pulled air into my body again.

“Leger? You okay?”

My eyes were going black, so I couldn’t make out Avery’s face. But I heard him. And that was enough.

CHAPTER 11

THE DEBRIEFING WAS HELD IN the hospital wing, since so many officers had ended up there.

“We feel it’s a success that we lost only two men tonight,” our commander said. “Considering their forces, it’s a testament to your training and personal skill that more of you weren’t killed.”

He paused, like maybe we should applaud, but we were too worn down for that.

“We have twenty-three rebels contained for sentencing after being interrogated, which is fantastic. However, I’m disappointed at the body count.” He stared us down. “Seventeen. Seventeen rebels dead.”

Avery ducked his head. He’d already confessed that two of those were his.

“You are not to kill unless you or another officer is being directly threatened, or if you see a rebel attacking a member of the royal family. We need this scum alive for questioning.”

I heard a few quiet huffs throughout the wing. This was one order I didn’t like. We could end things so much faster if we simply eliminated the rebels that came into the palace. But the king wanted his answers, and rumor had it there were particular ways he tortured information out of rebels. I hoped never to learn what those ways were.

“That said, you all did an excellent job protecting the palace and subduing the threat against it. Unless you are one of the few with serious injuries, your posts for the day are the same as originally scheduled. Get sleep if you can, and get ready. It’s going to be a long day with the state the palace is in.”

The head butler thought it would be best to have the royal family and the Elite do their work outside while the staff worked to get the palace back into a presentable shape. The women of the German Federation and the Italian monarchy were coming in a handful of days and the maids were already overwhelmed with preparations.

Between the glaring sun, exhaustion, and my starched uniform, I was already uncomfortable. Add the searing pain from the gash in my head, hidden bruises from being strangled, and some damage I couldn’t even remember getting in my leg, and I was just plain miserable.

The only good thing about this day was that the setup allowed me

to be near America. I watched as she sat with Kriss, planning their upcoming event. Besides Celeste, I'd never seen America upset at one of the other girls, but everything about her body language today suggested that she was unhappy with Kriss. Kriss, however, looked completely oblivious as she chatted to America and peeked over at Maxon time and again. It bothered me a little that America followed Kriss's gaze, but I doubted her feelings were changing. How could she ever look at him and not see Marlee screaming?

The tents and tables around the lawn almost made it look like the royal family was hosting a garden party. Had I not seen it myself, I wouldn't have guessed that the palace had been ransacked. Everyone here tended to forget about the attacks and move on.

I couldn't figure out if that was because dwelling on the attacks only made them that much more terrifying or if there was simply no time. It occurred to me that if the royal family really stopped and thought about the attacks, maybe they'd find a better way of preventing them.

"Don't know why I even bother," the king said a little too loudly. He handed a paper to someone and gave them a quiet order. "Erase Maxon's marks on this; they're distracting."

While the words filled my ears, America's gaze took all of my sight. She watched me carefully. I could tell she was worried about the bandages on my head, the limp in my steps. I gave her a wink, hoping to calm her nerves. I wasn't sure if I could make it through a whole day on rounds and then switch with someone to guard her door tonight, but if that was my only way to—

"Rebels! Run!"

I turned my head toward the palace doors, sure someone was confused.

"What?" Markson called.

"Rebels! Inside the palace!" Lodge yelled. "They're coming!"

I watched the queen bolt upright and run around the side of the palace, heading for a secret entrance under the protection of her maids.

The king snatched up his papers. If I was him, I'd be more worried about my neck than any lost information, no matter what those documents said.

America was still in her chair, paralyzed. I took a step to go get her, but Maxon jumped in front of me, shoving Kriss into my arms.

"Run!" he ordered. I hesitated, thinking of America. "Run!"

I did what I had to and bolted as Kriss called out to Maxon over and over again. A split second later, I heard gunshots and saw a swarm of people flood out of the palace, almost an equal mix of soldiers and rebels.

“Tanner!” I yelled, stopping him as he headed toward the fray. I shoved Kriss in his arms. “Follow the queen.”

He obeyed without question, and I turned to get Mer.

“America! No! Come back!” Maxon screamed. I followed his panicked gaze and saw America running frantically toward the forest, rebels fast on her heels.

No.

The staccato rhythm of the guards firing accentuated America’s pace, hurried and perilous. The rebels were nearly on top of her, bags stuffed. They seemed younger and fitter than the group last night, and I wondered if these were their children, trying to finish what their parents started.

I pulled out my gun and took my stance. I had my eye trained on the back of a rebel’s head, and I fired three quick shots. They all missed when the guy zigzagged and ran behind a tree.

Maxon took a few desperate steps in the direction of the forest, but his father grabbed him before he got very far.

“Stand down!” Maxon yelled, pushing out of his father’s grasp. “You’ll hit her. Cease fire!”

Though America wasn’t a member of the royal family, I doubted anyone would be upset if we killed these rebels without questioning. I ran into the field, took my stance again, and shot twice. Nothing.

Maxon’s hands gripped my collar. “I said stand down!”

While I was an inch or two taller than he was, and I generally thought him to be a coward, the rage in his eyes at that moment demanded respect.

“Forgive me, sir.”

He released me with a push, turning around and running his hand through his hair. I’d never seen him pace like that. It reminded me of his father when he was on the verge of exploding.

Everything he was showing on the outside, I felt on the inside. One of his Elite was gone; the only girl I’d ever loved was missing. I didn’t know if she would be able to outrun the rebels or find a place to hide. My heart was racing with fear and falling apart in hopelessness at the same time.

I’d promised May I wouldn’t let anyone hurt her. I’d failed.

I looked behind me, not sure what I was expecting to see. The girls and staff had all made it to safety. No one remained but the prince, the king, and a dozen or so guards.

Maxon finally looked up at us, and his expression reminded me of a caged animal. “Get her. Get her now!” he screamed.

I debated just running into the forest, wanting to reach America before anyone else did. But how would I find her?

Markson stepped forward. “Come on, boys. Let’s get organized.”

We followed him into the field.

My steps were sluggish and I tried to steady myself. I needed to be sharp today. *We're going to find her*, I promised myself. *She's tougher than anyone knows.*

"Maxon, go to your mother," I heard the king order.

"You can't be serious. How am I supposed to sit in some safe room while America's missing? She could be dead." I turned back to see Maxon double over and heave, nearly throwing up over the thought.

King Clarkson pulled him upright, gripping him firmly at the shoulders and shaking him. "Get it together. We need you safe. Go. Now."

Maxon balled his fists, slightly bending his elbows, and for a split second, I genuinely thought he was about to punch his father.

Maybe it wasn't my place, but I felt certain the king could demolish Maxon if he had the inclination. I didn't want the guy to die.

After a few charged breaths, Maxon wrenched himself out of his father's grasp and stomped into the palace.

I whipped my head around, hoping the king wouldn't realize someone had noticed that interaction. I was wondering more and more about the king's dissatisfaction with his son, but after that, I couldn't help but think things went much deeper than Maxon scribbling the wrong notes on his paperwork.

Why would someone so concerned with his son's safety be so . . . aggressive toward him?

I caught up to the other officers just as Markson started talking. "Are any of you familiar with this forest?"

We all stood silent.

"It's very large, and branches into a wide spread of trees just a few feet in, as you can see. The palace walls go back about four hundred feet before curving in to meet, but the wall toward the back of the forest has been in disrepair. It wouldn't be too hard for the rebels to get over a damaged portion, especially considering how easily they got over the strongest sections at the front."

Well, perfect.

"We're going to spread out in a line and walk slowly. Look for footprints, dropped goods, bent branches, anything that could be a clue to where they've taken her. If it gets too dark, we'll come back for flashlights and fresh men."

He eyed us all. "I do not want to come back empty-handed. Either with the lady alive or with her body, we are not leaving the king or prince without answers tonight, do you understand me?"

"Yes, sir," I yelled, and the others joined.

"Good. Spread out."

We had only moved a few yards when Markson held out a hand,

stopping me.

"That's a pretty serious limp, Leger. Are you up for this?" he asked.

My blood drained, and I pictured myself going into a rage much like Maxon had. There was no way in hell I wasn't going.

"I'm perfectly fine, sir," I vowed.

Markson looked me over again. "We need a strong team for this. Maybe you should stay behind."

"No, sir," I answered quickly. "I've never disobeyed an order, sir. Don't make me do it now."

My eyes were dead serious, and I was sure that was what he saw when I stared him down, determined to go. There was a half smile on his face when he nodded and started heading toward the trees.

"Fine. Let's go."

Everything felt like it was moving in slow motion. We would call out for America, and stop to listen for a reply, finding ourselves fooled by the slightest motion or breeze. Someone would find a footprint, but the dirt was so dry, the mark would have disintegrated into nothing two steps later, leaving us with little more than wasted time. Twice we found scraps of clothes caught in low branches, but nothing matched what America was wearing. The worst was the few drops of blood we found. We stopped for an hour to look through every cloistered tree, explore any speck of dirt that might have been upturned.

The evening was coming on, and soon we would lose the light.

While the others marched forward, I stood still for a minute. In any other scenario, I would have found this beautiful. The light filtered down, almost like it wasn't sunshine at all, but its ghost. The trees reached for one another, like they were desperate for company, and the entire feeling of the place was somewhat haunting.

And I had to brace myself for the possible reality that I would leave this place and not have her with me. Worse, I might leave it carrying her body.

The thought was crippling. What would I fight for in this world if I wasn't fighting for her?

I was trying to look for the good. She was the only good in me.

I bit back the tears and stood strong. I would just have to keep fighting.

"Be sure to look everywhere," Markson reminded us. "If they've killed her, they might have hung her or tried to bury her. Pay attention."

His words made me feel sick again, but I pushed past them. "Lady America!" I cried out.

"I'm here!" I trained my ears on the sound, too afraid to believe.

"I'm over here!"

America came running, shoeless and dirty, and I holstered my gun to open my arms for her.

"Thank goodness." I sighed. I wanted to kiss her then and there. But she was breathing and in my arms, and that would have to be enough. "I've got her! She's alive!" I called to the others, watching as the uniforms came toward us.

She was trembling a little, and I could tell she was stunned from the whole experience.

Injured leg or not, I was keeping her in my arms no matter what. I cradled her to me, and she put her hands behind my head, holding on. "I was terrified we were going to find your body somewhere," I confessed. "Are you hurt?"

"My legs a little."

I peeked down, and there were some bloody cuts. All things considered, we were lucky.

Markson stopped in front of us, trying to contain his happiness at finding her. "Lady America, are you injured at all?"

"Just some scratches on my legs."

"Did they try to hurt you?" he continued.

"No. They never caught up to me."

That's my girl.

All the faces wore gleefully shocked expressions at this news, but Markson was by far the happiest. "None of the other girls could have outrun them, I don't think."

America let out a breath and smiled. "None of the other girls is a Five."

I laughed, hearing the others do the same. Not every experience in the lowers was useless.

"Good point." Markson gave me a pat on the shoulder while he looked at America. "Let's get you back." He led the way, shouting out more instructions.

"I know you're fast and smart, but I was terrified," I told her as we moved.

She put her mouth to my ear. "I lied to the officer."

"What do you mean?" I whispered back.

"They did catch up with me, eventually." I stared at her, wondering what was so bad that she didn't want to confess it in front of the others. "They didn't do anything, but this one girl saw me. She curtsied and ran off."

Relief set in. Then confusion. "Curtsied?"

"I was surprised, too. She didn't look angry or threatening at all. In fact, she just looked like a normal girl." She paused a minute before adding, "She had books, lots of them."

“That seems to happen a lot,” I told her. “No clue what they’re doing with them. My guess is kindling. I think it’s cold where they stay.”

It seemed more and more apparent that the rebels just wanted to ruin everything the palace had—its fine things, its walls, even its sense of safety—and taking the king’s prized possessions for the sake of having something to burn seemed like a big middle finger to the monarchy.

Had I not seen how cruel they could be firsthand, I would have found it funny.

The others were so close that we kept silent for the rest of the trip, but the walk felt much shorter with America in my arms. I wished it was longer. After today, I didn’t want her anywhere I couldn’t see her.

“The next few days might be busy for me, but I’ll try to come see you soon,” I whispered as the palace came into view. I’d have to give her back to them now.

She tilted in toward me. “Okay.”

“Take her to Doctor Ashlar, Leger, and you’re off duty. Good job today,” Markson said, slapping my back again.

The halls were still full of staff cleaning up from the first attack, and the nurses were so quick when we got to the hospital wing that I didn’t get to speak to America again. But as I laid her on the bed, looking at her tattered dress and sliced legs, I couldn’t help but think this was all my fault. When I traced the steps back to the very start, I knew that it was. I had to start making up for it.

America was sleeping when I crept into the hospital wing that night. She was cleaner, but her face still seemed worried, even at rest.

“Hey, Mer,” I whispered, rounding her bed. She didn’t stir. I didn’t dare sit, not even with the excuse of checking on the girl I rescued. I stood in the freshly pressed uniform I would only wear for the few minutes it took to deliver this message.

I reached out to touch her, but then pulled back. I looked into her sleeping face and spoke.

“I—I came to tell you I’m sorry. About today, I mean.” I sucked in a deep breath. “I should have run for you. I should have protected you. I didn’t, and you could have died.”

Her lips pursed and unpursed as she dreamed.

“Honestly, I’m sorry for a lot more than that,” I admitted. “I’m sorry I got mad in the tree house. I’m sorry I ever said to send in the stupid form. It’s just that I have this idea . . .” I swallowed. “I have this idea that maybe you were the only one I could make everything right for.

“I couldn’t save my dad. I couldn’t protect Jemmy. I can barely

keep my family afloat, and I just thought that maybe I could give you a shot at a life that would be better than the one that I would have been able to give you. And I convinced myself that was the right way to love you.”

I watched her, wishing I had the nerve to confess this while she could argue back with me and tell me how wrong I’d been.

“I don’t know if I can undo it, Mer. I don’t know if we’ll ever be the same as we used to be. But I won’t stop trying. You’re it for me,” I said with a shrug. “You’re the only thing I’ve ever wanted to fight for.”

There was so much more to say, but I heard the door to the hospital wing open. Even in the dark, Maxon’s suit was impossible to miss. I started walking away, head down, trying to look like I was just on a round.

He didn’t acknowledge me, barely even noticed me as he moved to America’s bed. I watched him pull up a chair and settle in beside her.

I couldn’t help but be jealous. From that first day in her brother’s apartment—from the very moment I knew how I felt about America—I’d been forced to love her from afar. But Maxon could sit beside her, touch her hand, and the gap between their castes didn’t matter.

I paused by the door, watching. While the Selection had frayed the line between America and me, Maxon himself was a sharp edge, capable of cutting the string entirely if he got too close. But I couldn’t get a clear idea of just how near America was letting him.

All I could do was wait and give America the time she seemed to need. Really, we all needed it.

Time was the only thing that would settle this.

EXCERPT FROM *THE ONE*

Read on for a sneak peek at



CHAPTER 1

THIS TIME WE WERE IN the Great Room enduring another etiquette lesson when bricks came flying through the window. Elise immediately hit the ground and started crawling for the side door, whimpering as she went. Celeste let out a high-pitched scream and bolted toward the back of the room, barely escaping a shower of glass. Kriss grabbed my arm, pulling me, and I broke into a run alongside her as we made our way to the exit.

“Hurry, ladies!” Silvia cried.

Within seconds, the guards had lined up at the windows and were firing, and the bursts of sound echoed in my ears as we fled. Whether they came with guns or stones, anyone showing the smallest level of aggression within sight of the palace would die. There was no more patience left for these attacks.

“I hate running in these shoes,” Kriss muttered, a heap of dress draped over her arm, eyes focused on the end of the hall.

“One of us is going to have to get used to it,” Celeste said, her breath labored.

I rolled my eyes. “If it’s me, I’ll wear sneakers every day. I’m already over this.”

“Less talking, more moving!” Silvia yelled.

“How do we get downstairs from here?” Elise asked.

“What about Maxon?” Kriss huffed.

Silvia didn’t answer. We followed her through a maze of hallways, looking for a path to the basement, watching as guard after guard ran in the opposite direction. I found myself admiring them, wondering at the courage it took to run *toward* danger for the sake of other people.

The guards passing us were completely indistinguishable from one another until a set of green eyes locked with mine. Aspen didn’t look afraid or even startled. There was a problem, and he was on his way to fix it. That was simply who he was.

Our gaze was brief, but it was enough. It was like that with Aspen. In a split second, without a word, I could tell him *Be careful and stay safe*. And saying nothing, he’d answer *I know, just take care of yourself*.

While I could easily be at peace with the things we didn’t need to say, I had no such luck with the things we’d said out loud. Our last conversation wasn’t exactly a happy one. I had been about to leave the palace and had asked him to give me some space to get over the Selection. And then I’d ended up staying and had given him no

explanation as to why.

Maybe his patience with me was falling short, his ability to see only the best in me running dry. Somehow I would have to fix that. I couldn't see a life for me that didn't include Aspen. Even now, as I hoped Maxon would choose me, a world without Aspen felt unimaginable.

"Here it is!" Silvia called, pushing a mysterious panel in a wall.

We started down the stairs, Elise and Silvia heading the charge.

"Damn it, Elise, pick up the pace!" Celeste yelled. I wanted to be irritated that she said it, but I knew we were all thinking the same thing.

As we descended into the darkness, I tried to reconcile myself to the hours that would be wasted, hiding like mice. We continued on, the sound of our escape covering the shouts until one man's voice rang out right on top of us.

"Stop!" he yelled.

Kriss and I turned together, watching as the uniform became clear. "Wait," she called to the girls below. "It's a guard."

We stood on the steps, breathing heavily. He finally reached us, gasping himself.

"Sorry, ladies. The rebels ran as soon as the shots were fired. Weren't in the mood for a fight today, I guess."

Silvia, running her hands over her clothes to smooth them, spoke for us. "Has the king deemed it safe? If not, you're putting these girls in a very dangerous position."

"The head of the guard cleared it. I'm sure His Majesty—"

"You don't speak for the king. Come on, ladies, keep moving."

"Are you serious?" I asked. "We're going down there for nothing."

She fixed me with a stare that might have stopped a rebel in his tracks, and I shut my mouth. Silvia and I had built a friendship of sorts as she unknowingly helped me distract myself from Maxon and Aspen with her extra lessons. After my little stunt on the *Report* a few days ago, it seemed that had dissolved into nothing. Turning to the guard, she continued. "Get an official order from the king, and we'll return. Keep walking, ladies."

The guard and I shared an exasperated look and parted ways.

Silvia showed absolutely no remorse when, twenty minutes later, a different guard came, telling us we were free to go upstairs.

I was so irritated by the whole situation, I didn't wait for Silvia or the other girls. I climbed the stairs, exiting somewhere on the first floor, and continued to my room with my shoes still hooked on my fingers. My maids were missing, but a small silver platter holding an envelope was waiting on the bed.

I recognized May's handwriting instantly and tore open the

envelope, devouring her words.

Ames,

We're aunts! Astra is perfect. I wish you were here to meet her in person, but we all understand you need to be at the palace right now. Do you think we'll be together for Christmas? Not that far away! I've got to get back to helping Kenna and James. I can't believe how pretty she is! Here's a picture for you. We love you!

May

I slipped the glossy photo from behind the note. Everyone was there except for Kota and me. James, Kenna's husband, was beaming, standing over his wife and daughter with puffy eyes. Kenna sat upright in the bed, holding a tiny pink bundle, looking equal parts thrilled and exhausted. Mom and Dad were glowing with pride, while May's and Gerad's enthusiasm jumped from the image. Of course Kota wouldn't have gone; there was nothing for him to gain from being present. But I should have been there.

I wasn't though.

I was here. And sometimes I didn't understand why. Maxon was still spending time with Kriss, even after all he'd done to get me to stay. The rebels unrelentingly attacked our safety from the outside, and inside, the king's icy words did just as much damage to my confidence. All the while, Aspen orbited me, a secret I had to keep. And the cameras came and went, stealing pieces of our lives to entertain the people. I was being pushed into a corner from every angle, and I was missing out on all the things that had always mattered to me.

I choked back angry tears. I was so tired of crying.

Instead I went into planning mode. The only way to set things right was to end the Selection.

Though I still occasionally questioned my desire to be the princess, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted to be Maxon's. If that was going to happen, I couldn't sit back and wait for it. Remembering my last conversation with the king, I paced as I waited for my maids.

I could hardly breathe, so I knew eating would be a waste. But it would be worth the sacrifice. I needed to make some progress, and I needed to do it fast. According to the king, the other girls were making advances toward Maxon—physical advances—and he'd said I was far too plain to have a chance of matching them in that department.

As if my relationship with Maxon wasn't complicated enough, there was a whole new issue of rebuilding trust. And I wasn't sure if

that meant I wasn't supposed to ask questions or not. While I felt pretty sure he hadn't gone that far physically with the other girls, I couldn't help but wonder. I'd never tried to be seductive before—pretty much every intimate moment I'd had with Maxon came about without intention—but I had to hope that if I was deliberate, I could make it clear that I was just as interested in him as the others.

I took a deep breath, raised my chin, and walked into the dining hall. I was purposely a minute or two late, hoping everyone would already be seated. I was right on that count. But the reaction was better than I'd hoped.

I curtsied, swinging my leg around so the slit in the dress fell open, leading nearly all the way up my thigh. The dress was a deep red, strapless and practically backless, and I was almost positive my maids had used magic to make it stay up at all. I rose, locking eyes with Maxon, who I noticed had stopped chewing. Someone dropped a fork.

Lowering my gaze, I walked to my seat, settling in next to Kriss.

"Seriously, America?" she whispered.

I tilted my head in her direction. "I'm sorry?" I replied, feigning confusion.

She put her silverware down, and we stared at each other. "You look trashy."

"Well, you look jealous."

I'd hit pretty close to the mark, because she flushed a bit before returning to her food. I took limited bites of my own, already miserably constricted. As dessert was being set in front of me, I chose to stop ignoring Maxon, and as I had hoped, his eyes were on me. He reached up and grabbed his ear immediately, and I demurely did the same. My gaze flickered quickly toward King Clarkson, and I tried not to smile. He was irritated, another trick I'd managed to get away with.

I excused myself first, giving Maxon a chance to admire the back of the dress, and scurried to my room. I closed the door to my room behind me and unzipped the gown immediately, desperate for a breath.

"How'd it go?" Mary asked, rushing over.

"He seemed stunned. They all did."

Lucy squealed, and Anne came to help Mary. "We'll hold it up. Just walk," she ordered. I did as I was told. "Is he coming tonight?"

"Yes. I'm not sure when, but he'll definitely be here." I perched on the edge of my bed, arms folded around my stomach to keep the open dress from falling down.

Anne gave me a sad face. "I'm sorry you'll have to be uncomfortable for a few more hours. I'm sure it'll be worth it though."

I smiled, trying to look like I was fine dealing with the pain. I'd told my maids I wanted to get Maxon's attention. I'd left out my hope

that, with any luck, this dress would be on the floor pretty soon.

“Do you want us to stay until he arrives?” Lucy asked, her enthusiasm bubbling over.

“No, just help me zip this thing back up. I need to think some things through,” I answered, standing so they could help me.

Mary took hold of the zipper. “Suck it in, miss.” I obeyed, and as the dress cinched me in again, I thought of a soldier going to war. Different armor but the same idea.

Tonight I was taking down a man.

CHAPTER 2

I OPENED THE BALCONY DOORS, letting the air sweeten my room. Even though it was December, the breeze was light and tickled my skin. We weren't allowed to go outside at all anymore, not without guards by our sides, so this would have to do.

I scurried around the room, lighting candles, trying to make the space inviting. The knock came at the door, and I blew out the match, bolted over to the bed, picked up a book, and fanned out my dress. *Why yes, Maxon, this is how I always look when I read.*

"Come in," I offered, barely loud enough to be heard.

Maxon entered, and I lifted my head delicately, catching the wonder in his eyes as he surveyed my dimly lit room. Finally he focused on me, his gaze traveling up my exposed leg.

"There you are," I said, closing the book and standing to greet him.

He shut the door and came in, his eyes locked on my curves. "I wanted to tell you that you look fantastic tonight."

I flicked my hair over my shoulder. "Oh, this thing? It was just sitting in the back of the closet."

"I'm glad you pulled it out."

I laced my fingers through his. "Come sit with me. I haven't seen you much lately."

He sighed and followed. "I'm sorry about that. Things have been a bit tense since we lost so many people in that rebel attack, and you know how my father is. We sent several guards to protect your families, and our forces are stretched thin, so he's worse than usual. And he's pressuring me to end the Selection, but I'm holding my ground. I want to have some time to think this through."

We sat on the edge of the bed, and I settled close to him. "Of course. You should be in charge of this."

He nodded. "Exactly. I know I've said it a thousand times, but when people push me, it makes me crazy."

I gave him a little pout. "I know."

He paused, and I couldn't read his face. I was trying to figure out how to move this forward without being pushy, but I wasn't sure how to manufacture a romantic moment.

"I know this is silly, but my maids put this new perfume on me today. Is it too strong?" I asked, tilting my neck so he could lean in and breathe.

He came near, his nose hitting a soft patch of skin. "No, dear, it's

lovely,” he said into the curve that led to my shoulder. Then he kissed me there. I swallowed, trying to focus. I needed to have some level of control.

“I’m glad you like it. I’ve really missed you.”

I felt his hand snake around my back, and I brought my face down. There he was, eyes looking into mine, our lips millimeters apart.

“How much have you missed me?” he breathed.

His stare, combined with his voice being so low, was doing funny things to my heartbeat. “So much,” I whispered back. “So, so much.”

I leaned forward, aching to be kissed. Maxon was confident, pulling me closer with one hand and stringing the other through my hair. My body wanted to melt into the kiss, but the dress stopped me. Then, suddenly nervous again, I remembered my plan.

Sliding my hands down Maxon’s arms, I guided his fingers to the zipper on the back of my dress, hoping that would be enough.

His hands lingered there for a moment, and I was seconds away from just asking him to unzip it when he burst out laughing.

The sound sobered me up pretty quickly.

“What’s so funny?” I asked, horrified, trying to think of an inconspicuous way to check my breath.

“Of everything you’ve done, this is by far the most entertaining!” Maxon bent over, hitting his knee as he laughed.

“Excuse me?”

He kissed me hard on my forehead. “I always wondered what it would be like to see you try.” He started laughing again. “I’m sorry; I have to go.” Even the way he stood held a sense of amusement. “I’ll see you in the morning.”

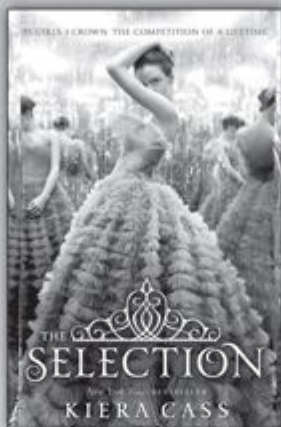
And then he left. He just left!

I sat there, completely mortified. Why in the world did I think I could pull that off? Maxon may not know everything about me, but at the very least he knew my character—and this? It wasn’t me.

I looked down at the ridiculous dress. It was way too much. Even Celeste wouldn’t have gone this far. My hair was too perfect, my makeup too heavy. He knew what I was trying to do from the second he walked through the doorway. Sighing, I went around the room, blowing out candles and wondering how I was supposed to face him tomorrow.

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